

UK urged to prioritise malnutrition and hunger as numbers facing crisis levels of food insecurity double

Background briefing

Prepared by [Development Initiatives](#) for [United Against Malnutrition & Hunger](#)

Top-line messages and evidence points

1. Malnutrition is set to get even worse as the world faces record levels of food insecurity.

- New analysis by DI shows that between 2019 and 2022, the number of people living in countries affected by humanitarian crisis and experiencing crisis levels of food insecurity almost doubled from 146 million in 2019 to 278 million in 2022.¹
- 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 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic.²

2. We are already in a protracted global nutrition crisis.

- Nearly half of all deaths in children under five are caused by undernutrition³ and a quarter of all adult deaths are attributable to poor diets.⁴
- According to the latest data, nearly one in four (22.0%) of children under five are stunted, and progress on stunting was slowing even before recent crises.
- An estimated 45 million children under the age of five were suffering from wasting, the deadliest form of malnutrition, which increases children's risk of death by up to 12 times. Furthermore, 149 million children under the age of five had stunted growth and development due to a chronic lack of essential nutrients in their diets.⁵

¹ Development Initiatives, 2022. *The food insecurity gap and protracted humanitarian crisis*. Available online: <https://devinit.org/resources/food-insecurity-gap-protracted-humanitarian-crisis/> (Accessed 20/02/2023). Note, this figure includes a wider range of countries than covered by the Global Report on Food Crises.

² FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2022. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0639en>

³ Child Malnutrition, 2022, UNICEF. Available online: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/>

⁴ Global Nutrition Report, 2021. *2021 Global Nutrition Report*. Available online: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/reports/2021-global-nutrition-report/health-and-environmental-impacts-of-diets-worldwide/>

⁵ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2022. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022. Repurposing food and agricultural policies to make healthy diets more affordable*. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0639en>

- The prevalence of anaemia among women of reproductive age is rising, having consistently decreased between 2000 to 2011. While the causes of anaemia are not only attributable to dietary intake, it is highly worrying to see this trend occurring even before Covid-19, which we know will considerably increase the prevalence.
- Poor diets are not only causing ill-health, but the current global food demand is also producing more than a third of greenhouse gas emissions, with no region having a diet that is sustainable for the environment.⁶

3. The UK has been instrumental in mobilising unprecedented global action on nutrition, yet is stepping back when it is needed most.

- The UK was the main driving force behind the global Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Compact in 2013, which accelerated global funding for nutrition.
- Between 2016 and 2021, the UK was the largest Development Assistance Committee (DAC) country donor of nutrition-specific⁷ official development assistance (ODA).⁸
- Between 2013 and 2020, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)⁹ had cumulatively disbursed around US\$6.8 billion (around £5 billion) of ODA for nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive projects.¹⁰
- But in 2021, UK nutrition-specific aid funding dropped significantly, to its lowest level since before 2012. The US\$51 million provided in 2021 was just 40% of the amount provided the year before (US\$126 million in 2020).¹¹
- FCDO has retained a dedicated nutrition and nutrition policy team who will continue to coordinate and deliver nutrition-specific programmes.
- Looking ahead, the UK's new N4G commitment (made in 2021) is to deliver a much lower £1.5 billion between 2022 and 2030. There is no explicit target for nutrition-specific spending and no apparent separate nutrition budget, such that this target can be realised only by spending through other sectors.¹²

⁶ Ibid

⁷ 'Nutrition specific' is based on gross ODA disbursements reported as 'basic nutrition'; presented in constant 2020 prices.

⁸ Official development assistance (ODA) is defined as government aid that promotes and specifically targets the economic development and welfare of developing countries. Hereafter referred to also as aid.

⁹ Created in 2020 by the merger of DFID and the FCO. Prior to 2020, only DFID data is captured.

¹⁰ Development Initiatives, 2022. *FCDO's aid spending for nutrition: 2020*. Available online: <https://www.devinit.org/resources/fcdos-aid-spending-nutrition-2020/> (Accessed 20/03/2023)

¹¹ Data from the Office for Economic Co-operation and Development's Creditor Reporting System (<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CRS1>)

¹² Development Initiatives, 2022. *FCDO's aid spending for nutrition: 2020*. Available online: <https://www.devinit.org/resources/fcdos-aid-spending-nutrition-2020/> (Accessed 20/03/2023)

Key definitions

Hunger refers to the FAO's Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), which is based on a **subjective** experience assessment of respondents, which is modelled over a period of 5–10 years of data.

(Acute) food insecurity refers to **access** to food in humanitarian settings, measuring objective criteria of access and malnutrition, and is based on semi-annual and projected data.

Introduction

The number of people facing crisis levels of food insecurity has reached record levels. Our own analysis of countries affected by humanitarian crisis reflects this worrying trend, showing that the number of people at crisis levels of food insecurity¹³ almost doubled between 2019 and 2022, from 146 million to 278 million people.

We can expect a reversal of gains that have been made to improve global nutrition, particularly among communities with the least resilience to shocks. Even before recent shocks, annual assessments of the state of global nutrition by the Global Nutrition Report made clear that there were unacceptable levels of malnutrition across the world. Nearly half of all deaths in children under five continue to be attributed to malnutrition,¹⁴ one in four children under five are stunted, and poor diets (which are the leading cause of death worldwide) are getting worse.¹⁵

The UK government rightly made global nutrition a top priority over a decade ago and showed great leadership. It spearheaded the Nutrition for Growth Compact with a first major Summit in 2013 that mobilised action across governments, civil society organisations, the private sector, international institutions and academia. This delivered a significant uplift in funding for global nutrition. N4G summits are now a mainstay for global nutrition action, with the most recent – led by the government of Japan in Tokyo – seeing more commitments than ever before to improve nutrition.

Yet despite this historic success, the UK has stepped back from the important position it once held. FCDO retains a nutrition function, but N4G funding pledged by the UK in 2021 is just a third of its previous funding commitment, and there is no mention of nutrition in its International Development Strategy, published in 2022.

¹³ Definition of 'crisis level acute food insecurity' or worse as given by IPC (crisis level is known as IPC Phase 3).

¹⁴ Child Malnutrition, 2022, UNICEF, accessed at <https://data.unicef.org/topic/nutrition/malnutrition/>

¹⁵ Global Nutrition Report, 2021. *2021 Global Nutrition Report*. Available online: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/reports/2021-global-nutrition-report/health-and-environmental-impacts-of-diets-worldwide/>

In recognition of the significant negative health, economic and environmental impacts the global nutrition crisis is creating, and the reality that this is set to get worse, it is no exaggeration to say that a stable and secure future cannot be achieved unless urgent action is taken. At this time, increased funding and political will on nutrition is vital. The UK has demonstrated that it can mobilise transformative nutrition action worldwide, it must step up into this position once again.

The global nutrition crisis – an overview

Key stats on malnutrition

The data presented below is the latest standardised and comparable data available at global level.¹⁶ It gives the best picture of the current situation prior to shocks and considering not all datasets are updated annually. Additional data might be available at country level, which may not be standardised or comparable and therefore should be used to complement the picture as a case study.

What the latest data shows, however, is that even before significant drivers of malnutrition escalated in recent years, the world was facing a global nutrition crisis. It shows unacceptable levels of all forms of malnutrition, and woefully inadequate progress across the board in most countries. And these figures cast a more positive picture than today's reality, given the inevitable impact of Covid-19, the global food crisis driven by the war in Ukraine, and other humanitarian disasters. This demonstrates just how worrying the state of global nutrition must be today.

Maternal, infant and young child nutrition

Undernutrition in children not only impacts their growth, but also their immune systems and their cognitive development. It has the potential to cause lifelong debilitating impacts.

- Globally, 20.5 million newborns (14.6% of all live births) have a low weight at birth.¹⁷
- Of all children under five years of age, 22.0% (149.2 million) are stunted and 6.7% (45.4 million) are wasted.¹⁸
- The prevalence of stunting has slowly reduced since 2015, but progress is too slow to meet the World Health Assembly targets by 2025.
- The prevalence of anaemia among women of reproductive age has consistently decreased from 2000 to 2011 (from 31.2% to 28.5%). However, it plateaued between 2011 and 2014, then slowly reversed and increased to 29.9% in 2019 – affecting 570.8 million women and girls. While the causes of anaemia are not

¹⁶ Due to significant time lags in availability of global data on nutrition outcomes, we are only able to see historic statistics, which therefore cannot give an accurate picture of the current state of malnutrition as a result of recent shocks and crises.

¹⁷ Global Nutrition Report, 2022. Country Nutrition Profiles. Available online: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/#overview> (Accessed 20/02/2023)

¹⁸ Ibid

only attributable to dietary intake, it is highly worrying to see this trend before Covid-19 (which we know will have considerably increased the prevalence).

- About 60% of children under five years of age in low- and middle-income countries are anaemic (with higher rates among those aged 6–24 months), with little change over the past decade.¹⁹
- 570.8 million (29.9% of) girls and women of reproductive age (15–49 years) are anaemic.²⁰

Progress against the World Health Assembly's Global Nutrition Targets

The global nutrition targets are unlikely to be achieved by 2025 globally and in most countries.²¹

Of 184 countries:

- Only a quarter of countries are on course to meet the targets of childhood stunting (53), childhood wasting (57).²²
- Most countries display “No progress or worsening” for the targets of anaemia (161) and low birth weight (82).²³
- The majority of countries on course to meet the exclusive breastfeeding target are located in Africa (20) and Asia (10). Almost half of countries have no data.

Key stats on food insecurity

A person is food insecure when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. Food insecurity is therefore a significant driver of malnutrition. There are different levels of severity for food insecurity: crisis level or worse means food insecurity that has reached a level requiring urgent assistance.

Humanitarian crises and food insecurity go hand in hand. The war in Ukraine and a severe drought in the Horn of Africa have been significant drivers of an increase in food insecurity over the last year. We also know that a growing number of people facing the highest levels of food insecurity are living in countries experiencing a protracted crisis (5+ years of UN-coordinated humanitarian appeal), and that the number of countries experiencing protracted crises is growing – reaching 36 last year, up from 34 the year before.²⁴

¹⁹ Global Nutrition Report, 2021. *2021 Global Nutrition Report*. Available online: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/reports/2021-global-nutrition-report/assessing-progress-towards-the-global-nutrition-targets/> (Accessed 20/02/2023)

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Global Nutrition Report, 2021, *2021 Global Nutrition Report*. Available online: <https://globalnutritionreport.org/reports/2021-global-nutrition-report/> (Accessed 20/02/2023)

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Development Initiatives, 2022. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022*. Available online: <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2022/> (Accessed 20/02/2023)

- According to latest research by the World Food Programme, a record 349 million people across 79 countries are facing acute food insecurity – up from 287 million in 2021, and ten times more than five years ago.²⁵
- Research on countries affected by humanitarian crisis undertaken by DI corroborates the alarming increase in food insecurity in recent years. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of people facing crisis levels of food insecurity in countries affected by humanitarian crisis increased by 53% (from 146 million to 224 million people).²⁶
- The number of people living in countries affected by humanitarian crisis and experiencing crisis levels of food insecurity almost doubled between 2019 and 2022, going from 146 million to 278 million.²⁷
- Of the 278 million people estimated to be experiencing food insecurity in countries affected by humanitarian crisis in 2022, 221 million (80%) were living in 30 countries experiencing protracted crisis.²⁸

The severity of food insecurity has consistently worsened over time and people living in countries facing protracted humanitarian crisis are more likely to experience more intense food insecurity. The eight countries with the deepest levels of food insecurity (South Sudan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central African Republic, Somalia, Haiti and Uganda) are facing protracted crises.

Financing for food sectors in food insecure places

- While total humanitarian assistance to food sectors in 53 countries and territories affected by high levels of food insecurity increased by 20%, looking at the amount provided per person in food crisis or worse shows a decrease of 40% from US\$85 per person in 2018 to US\$51 in 2021.²⁹
- Development assistance to food sectors in food crisis countries also decreased, by almost 10% to US\$6.2 billion in 2020 (latest data available) from the previous year. This follows a steady increase between 2016 and 2019.³⁰

²⁵ World Food Programme, 2023, *A World Food Crisis*, available online: <https://www.wfp.org/global-hunger-crisis#:~:text=A%20record%20349%20million%20people,survive%20in%20famine%2Dlike%20conditions>

²⁶ Development Initiatives, 2022. *The food insecurity gap and protracted humanitarian crisis*. Available online: <https://devinit.org/resources/food-insecurity-gap-protracted-humanitarian-crisis/> (Accessed 20/02/2023)

²⁷ Development Initiatives, 2022. *The food insecurity gap and protracted humanitarian crisis*. Available online: <https://devinit.org/resources/food-insecurity-gap-protracted-humanitarian-crisis/> (Accessed 20/02/2023). Note, this figure includes a wider range of countries than covered by the Global Report on Food Crises.

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Global Network Against Food Crises, 2022. *2022 Financing Flows and Food Crises Report*. Available online: https://www.fightfoodcrises.net/fileadmin/user_upload/fightfoodcrises/doc/resources/GNAFC_FF_FC_Report2022.pdf

³⁰ Ibid

The UK government's track record on global nutrition

The UK government's successes

- The UK has spearheaded the global fight against malnutrition. It was behind the global Nutrition for Growth compact launched in 2013, which mobilised unprecedented action across government, businesses, civil society organisations and the private sector. The 2013 Summit delivered US\$24 billion in pledges from donors, equal to around a 33% uplift in global nutrition spending.³¹ The UK then supported all subsequent N4G Summit organisers by sharing their experience, participating closely in the organising process of 2017 in Milan and 2021 in Tokyo.
- Between 2013 and 2020, FCDO disbursed over £5 billion (around US\$6.8 billion) of nutrition aid ODA.
 - FCDO has cumulatively disbursed £530.2 million in nutrition-specific funding (excluding matched funding) – around £44.7 million shy of its original N4G commitment of £574.8 million.
 - FCDO has cumulatively disbursed £4.6 billion to nutrition-sensitive interventions since 2013, exceeding its nutrition-sensitive target of £2.1 billion.
 - In 2020, FCDO's total aid spending for nutrition reached an annual record US\$1.1 billion (around £855.6 million).³²
- In 2020, a record 79% of FCDO's nutrition spending had gender policy objectives. FCDO also spent US\$1.6 million of nutrition-sensitive ODA on programmes specifically designed for ending violence against women and girls.³³
- In 2021, the UK government provided UNICEF with seed funding to create a nutrition match fund to scale-up prevention and treatment of child wasting services and incentivise domestic resource mobilisation.³⁴
- FCDO has retained a dedicated nutrition and nutrition policy team who will continue to coordinate and deliver some nutrition-specific programmes.

³¹ Nutrition for Growth Compact, 2013, accessed at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/207274/nutrition-for-growth-commitments.pdf

³² Development Initiatives, 2022. *FCDO's aid spending for nutrition: 2020*. Available online: <https://www.devinit.org/resources/fcdos-aid-spending-nutrition-2020/> (Accessed 20/03/2023)

³³ Ibid

³⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/joint-statement-child-wasting-and-launch-nutrition-match-fund>

The UK government stepping back

- UK nutrition-specific aid funding dropped significantly in 2021, to the lowest level since before 2012. The US\$51 million provided in 2021 was just 40% of the amount provided the year before (US\$126 million in 2020).³⁵
- Despite ambition in previous N4G Summits, in 2021 the UK committed £1.5 billion towards nutrition objectives between 2022 and 2030.³⁶ To date, there is no breakdown target for nutrition-specific spending and no separate budget allocation for nutrition. In this regard, the UK has been explicit about its ambition to integrate nutrition across their aid portfolio.
- The UK reduced humanitarian assistance by US\$1.0 billion in 2021, a 39% decrease from 2020, down to US\$1.6 billion. This was the biggest cut to humanitarian aid from any government donor.³⁷ It follows a 16% reduction already made between 2019 and 2020.³⁸
- Despite having been a core focus for the UK government in 2013, nutrition is not mentioned in the UK's 2021 International Development Strategy, which sets out the government's priorities.³⁹

Conclusion and call to action

The global nutrition crisis is deepening as food insecurity hits record levels, creating devastating impacts on people's lives across the world. The UK has demonstrated over the last decade that it has the ability to mobilise significant and transformative action across a wide range of stakeholders – from governments to the private sector. The world needs this more now than ever. Nutrition has been deprioritised by the UK government, as demonstrated in its recent spending and funding commitments alongside the recent International Development Strategy. It means we have lost this leadership when it matters most. There are immediate actions the UK government can and must take in light of the current situation:

- Mobilise the full breadth of expertise and resources the UK has at its disposal to save lives and provide sustainable solutions to hunger and malnutrition.
- Create new partnerships between government, the private sector and the science and technology sectors to drive innovation that can catalyse greater impact.

³⁵ Data from the Office for Economic Co-operation and Development's Creditor Reporting System (<https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=CRS1>)

³⁶ Development Initiatives, 2022. *FCDO's aid spending for nutrition: 2020*. Available online: <https://www.devinit.org/resources/fcdos-aid-spending-nutrition-2020/> (Accessed 20/03/2023)

³⁷ Development Initiatives, 2022. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022*. Available online: <https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2022/> (Accessed 20/02/2023)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Development Initiatives, 2022. *What can we expect from UK aid for global nutrition?* Available online: <https://www.devinit.org/blog/what-can-we-expect-uk-aid-global-nutrition/> (Accessed 20/02/2023)

- Restore UK funding for nutrition programmes in view of the fact that the funding commitment is a floor not a ceiling, and use that support to leverage additional finance and drive international action.

About Development Initiatives (DI)

Development Initiatives unlocks the power of data to enable policies and investments that improve the lives of people experiencing poverty, inequality and crisis. DI achieves this through working with partners to equip them with robust data-driven evidence, tools, and approaches that inform, persuade and inspire change.

DI has staff and partners around the world with offices in the UK, Kenya, Uganda and the US.

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