

Forgotten Crisis, Forgotten Children: Millions of Yemen's Children Going Hungry



PHOTO: Ali Ashwal/Save the Children

Save the Children calls for:

- An immediate and permanent ceasefire
- An inclusive and sustainable political solution
- Prioritisation of the rehabilitation of Hodeidah port
- Immediate implementation of the UN VIM
- All parties to the conflict to respect IHL
- Free and unhindered access to all populations in need
- A renewed focus on food security, livelihoods and nutrition funding

Key facts and figures

Pre-conflict

- 2nd worst child malnutrition and stunting levels in the world
- Half of all children malnourished
- 1 in 10 children not living to the age of five
- 80-90% of all staple foods imported

Since 26 March

- 9.9 million children in need of humanitarian assistance
- 7.7 million children food insecure
- 1.3 million under-fives acutely malnourished
- Almost 600 health facilities no longer functioning

The scale of suffering in Yemen is staggering. Nine months on since the escalation in violence has left an already impoverished country in a state of freefall with 21.2 million Yemenis – or 82 per cent of the population – now in need of humanitarian assistance¹. Almost half of those in need are children, including 7.7 million who do not have enough to eat on a daily basis and do not know where their next meal is coming from. This desperate food security situation has contributed to child malnutrition rates reaching an all-time high, despite already ranking amongst the worst in the world before the conflict.

Increasing child malnutrition rates

Before the recent conflict escalation, Yemen held the unenviable record of having the second worst malnutrition and stunting levels globally, with half of all children malnourished and one in ten children not living to reach the age of five as a result². The severe food insecurity situation brought about by the ongoing conflict has only exacerbated child malnutrition rates, with 1.3 million children under the age of five now suffering from acute, life-threatening malnutrition – 320,000 severely³, which is double the number of cases reported in 2014⁴. Nutrition SMART surveys conducted by the Nutrition Cluster in August 2015 found that global acute malnutrition (GAM) levels were over the emergency threshold of 15% in Aden (19.2%), Hajjah (20.9%) and Hodeida (31%). Such levels have been aggravated by high food insecurity, poor access to health services and failing water and sanitation services.

Background

As the conflict in Yemen enters its ninth month, the situation for children and their families becomes more and more desperate with each passing day. Over 1.3 million children under the age of five are suffering from acute malnutrition, and with the food security situation deteriorating further, their families are powerless to help them. It is more urgent than ever that all parties participating in renewed peace talks agree to end the conflict, lift restrictions on humanitarian access and further ease restrictions on imports.

Jana* is 33 years old and was displaced from Sa'ada with her 5 young children. “I have no steady income. Sometimes we receive things; blankets, mattresses, soap for example but what we really need is food. When I can I work cleaning other people’s homes in the neighbourhood but it is never enough. We are struggling to survive now.

My little one, Marid*, got very sick recently. He is only three years old. He had diarrhoea and was vomiting a lot. It is a common sickness amongst the children here. But he was very ill as he is only small. I needed to buy him medicines but we had no money. So I sold our mattresses. This is the kind of choices we have to make here. If I hadn’t have got the medicines I think he may have died.”

Restricted imports and access

Over the past eight months, a de facto air and naval blockade has significantly reduced the amount of basic commodities, commercial goods, and humanitarian aid entering one of the world’s least self-sufficient countries. Before the conflict, Yemen relied on imports for 80-90% of all staple foods, including 85% of cereal imports⁵, and over half of its fuel supplies. As a direct consequence of that blockade, only a fraction of what the population of Yemen actually needs has made it into Yemen since the start of the conflict and the introduction of the blockade in March. For example in September, only 1% of requisite fuel supplies entered Yemen, followed by only 12% in October⁶. In addition, the bombing of Yemen’s main port – Al Hodeidah - in the north of the country during August (which damaged several offloading cranes⁷) and the ongoing delay in the implementation of a UN mandated Verification and Inspection Mechanism (which is designed to streamline the processing of shipments) have further restricted civilian access to essential basic commodities like food supplies.

The onward distribution of supplies that do make it into Yemen are hampered by widespread insecurity, a lengthy and bureaucratic travel and deconfliction process and a lack of fuel for transportation. Although



Marid*

PHOTO: Mark Kaye/Save the Children

we have seen slight improvements in food availability in a few urban areas, the overall picture is bleak, particularly for IDPs in rural communities and governorates where ground fighting continues to be particularly intense.

While we recognise that restrictions on imports have eased in recent weeks, the cumulative effects of the eight month old de facto blockade affecting imports have resulted in the costs of essential food supplies increasing astronomically when compared with pre-crisis figures. In November, the average price of wheat flour was 57% more than before the conflict. Other

Amira* is 27 years old and lives in Amran with 19 of her family members including her parents, brothers and sisters. Five members of the family, including Amira, suffer from a debilitating hereditary disease. Amira says “before the war, we used to receive a small amount of money from the government (Disabled Care and Rehabilitation Fund) which helped to meet our family’s basic food needs. But when the war started we didn’t receive the money anymore”. She adds “food prices and prices for everything are higher and sometimes three times higher. It has become difficult for poor families like us who don’t have an income to buy basic food or medicines. If we are lucky, we will have a chicken once a week. But this has to feed 19 and we often don’t eat dinner and go to bed hungry. My elder sisters and brother and I can cope with this situation but I feel sorry for my brothers and sisters who are younger and do not understand why they go to sleep hungry”

Marwan*, Amira's 7 year old brother, tells us “we struggle now with lack of everything but my father keeps telling me that he believes in our future and when we finish our education everything will improve. If I don't have a meal before going to school, I hope I will the next day. I like to eat cheese and eggs for breakfast before I go to school but I haven't had it since the war started.”



Marwan* and his brother Mursi*

PHOTO: Mohammed Awadh/Save the Children

food essentials such as onions and red beans have risen in price by 74% and 82% respectively compared with pre-crisis prices in addition to cooking gas, which has risen by a staggering 325%. Such extreme price hikes are a direct result of the reduced food imports, increased commercial shipping costs (which reflect the risks of operating in such an unpredictable and insecure context) and an exponential increase in the price of fuel needed to produce and transport food due to drastically reduced fuel shipments.

Fuel is critical to Yemen's food security. Without it, the grinding of wheat into flour, the irrigation of domestically produced crops and the transportation of food commodities from source to market becomes virtually impossible. The average cost of petrol has increased by 274% compared with pre-crisis levels, and diesel on average is 287% more expensive⁹, therefore contributing to a reduction in domestic food and agricultural production which have grown in importance given reductions in imported supplies.

As a direct result of such limited supplies, black market prices have increased beyond the reach of desperate families, many of whom have been forced

to decide between providing food or other essentials such as shelter or medicines for their children. When presented with such ultimatums, negative coping mechanisms such as reducing the size and number of meals per day, resorting to eating cheaper, less nutritious food stuffs or simply going hungry, are on the rise which represents a major concern for longer term health implications.

Increasing strains on essential supplies and services

Yemen's health system has not been spared in this war – 69 health facilities have been destroyed or damaged by conflict and almost 600 health facilities are no longer functioning¹⁰, including those that provide specialist care for children. As a result of damage, insecurity and a lack of fuel, medicines, supplies and staff, over 190 health facilities that were providing specialist nutrition services before the crisis have closed¹¹ leaving hundreds of thousands of children without access to the care and interventions needed to prevent severe malnutrition from developing.

2.5 million¹² people, almost a third of which are children, have been displaced by the conflict so far. Given the propensity for increased negative coping strategies amongst displaced families who have often lost their sources of income, their homes and their possessions, there are likely to be increased strains on already limited basic commodities and essential services in host communities. Access to children's services including healthcare, nutrition, protection and education, particularly in areas with high IDP populations, continue to be inaccessible to millions of children.

Taiz governorate for instance is hosting nearly 400,000¹³ IDPs and has witnessed intensive and sustained fighting leading to a rapidly deteriorating

food security situation. Insecurity and denial of access by parties to the conflict has restricted all but a fraction of the humanitarian aid and commercial supplies needed to support the governorate's population since fighting intensified in August. As a result, the price of wheat flour in Taiz is 134% higher than before the crisis, compared to the national average increase of 57%¹⁴. Although WFP recently managed to deliver some food assistance to the city's beleaguered population¹⁵, the situation for children in Taiz remains deeply concerning. By imposing restrictions and impeding humanitarian access into and throughout the governorate, parties to the conflict are contributing to the worsening humanitarian crisis and denying children their rights.



Mohammed*'s children: Lu'a'e* and Malak*

PHOTO: Mohammed Awadh/Save the Children

Mohammed* is 34 years old and was displaced from Sa'ada, along with 16 other family members to Amran. "Before the war I used to have my own grocery shop in Sa'ada, life was so easy. I could feed my children, my sisters and my brother and I could send my children to school. We had a good income to live our life in peace, but now we are struggling so much.

I still remember the first days we spent here, it was very difficult to see my family, especially the children starving and with no money to buy food.

In my experiences it is the first time I've seen prices double. It's crazy. I have lived through crises and wars since 2004 but the prices of food and other basic needs were never as high as they are now."

How is Save the Children responding?

Save the Children is responding to the needs of children in the North, South and Centre of Yemen to address the severe food insecurity situation and critical malnutrition levels. To date, our teams on the ground have provided over 35,000 households with either food distributions to ensure that the vital nutritional needs of vulnerable families are met, or unconditional cash transfers which enable families to prioritise their own needs. Save the Children run targeted acute malnutrition treatment programmes for those most at risk, including under-fives and pregnant and lactating women, in 160 supported fixed and mobile health units. We also support the training of health workers and community volunteers in addition to providing life-saving referrals and treatment for both severe and moderate acute malnutrition cases. Overall, Save the Children has reached over 400,000 people in Yemen since April 2015, including over 220,000 children.

Recommendations

Save the Children is deeply concerned by the deteriorating food security situation and alarming child malnutrition rates in Yemen and calls on all parties to the conflict and the wider international community to take the following steps to end the suffering that is being inflicted on children in Yemen;

- While Save the Children welcomes the resumption of peace talks this month, it is crucial that all parties to the conflict work to implement and uphold an **immediate and permanent ceasefire** and embark on meaningful negotiations to find an **inclusive and sustainable political solution** in order to stop the ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen from deteriorating even further. Meanwhile, the international community must do all it can to counter the cumulative effect of nine months of a de facto blockade in order to rapidly scale up the import of both humanitarian and commercial supplies. To this end:
 - The UN, donors and the Government of Yemen must prioritise the **rehabilitation of Hodeida port** to restore it to the complete operational capability that it had before 18 August
 - The UN, donor community and the Government of Yemen must work together to ensure that the **UN Verification and Inspection Mechanism is implemented** without delay in order to ensure that increased commercial and humanitarian shipments can enter Yemen
- The conflict is taking a terrible toll on Yemen's health system. With 600 health facilities having closed so far, many as a result of damage and destruction, millions of children are being denied the life-saving services that they need. Save the Children calls on **all parties to the conflict to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law**, to prevent indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, including hospitals and health facilities
- Defined by the UN as a 'virtual state of siege'¹⁶, the situation in the city of Taiz is affecting lasting damage on the vulnerable children and families caught in the crossfire, who are being denied humanitarian aid and vital services; Parties to the conflict must therefore immediately allow **full humanitarian access into and around Taiz governorate** in order to allow vital supplies in and must abide by their obligations under international humanitarian law to allow free and unhindered access to all populations in need
- Although we recognise the generosity of donors to date, the rapidly deteriorating food insecurity situation must be met with a **renewed focus from the donor community on food security, livelihoods and nutrition funding** to prevent irreparable damage to the lives and livelihoods of Yemen's children and their families

Notes

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Yemen, November 2015

² World Food Programme, Yemen Comprehensive Food Security Survey 2014

³ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Yemen, November 2015

⁴ UNICEF, Yemen Humanitarian Situation Report, 2-20 October 2015

⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Executive Brief: Escalating Conflict, Yemen, 27 November 2015

⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Yemen: Snapshot on Shipping and Food Imports, 11 November 2015

⁷ Logistics Cluster, Yemen Situation Update, 7 September 2015

⁸ World Food Programme, Yemen Market Situation Update, Weeks 1 and 2: November 2015

⁹ World Food Programme, Yemen Market Situation Update, Weeks 1 and 2: November 2015

¹⁰ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Yemen, November 2015

¹¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2016 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Yemen, November 2015

¹² Protection Cluster Yemen: Task Force on Population Movement, 6th Report, 10 December 2015

¹³ Protection Cluster Yemen: Task Force on Population Movement, 6th Report, 10 December 2015

¹⁴ World Food Programme, Yemen Market Situation Update, Weeks 1 and 2: November 2015

¹⁵ World Food Programme, Situation Report 18, 13 December 2015

¹⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, Stephen O'Brien, Statement on Yemen, 24 November 2015