

# FAMINE PREVENTION AND MITIGATION

UNICEF POSITION PAPER

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for every child

## KEY MESSAGES

**Every child, every woman, every person has the right to nutrition and today millions of children, women and families live in contexts at risk of famine.** Most recently, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen have experienced crises levels that have pushed their food, nutrition, and health systems and indicators to the brink and sometimes beyond.

**Children are most at risk in these situations and face a greater risk of severe malnutrition and death in early childhood.** These crises also produce irreversible, life-long consequences stemming from poor physical growth, brain development and learning capacity. Responding to famine must focus – first and foremost - on protecting children and their rights, including (but not limited to) their right to nutrition.

**To change this picture, we need a drastic rethink in our collective approach to famine prevention and response.**

**1. We must use the right language at the right time.**

Famines have a clear, commonly agreed international definition based on simultaneous food, nutrition, and health crises. These crises can occur alone or in twos. Famines are the exceptional result of all three occurring at the same time and resulting in an extraordinarily severe crisis. If we misuse the term famine, we risk entrenching public fatigue at a time when urgent collective action is needed.

**2. We must support responses that include, but go beyond, food aid.**

Preventing famine is possible. It requires both early action and interventions that go beyond food aid to address its direct and underlying drivers. When famine hits, our interventions must be timely, at scale, and multi-sectoral whilst remaining focused on what we know works and can be delivered in fragile contexts. This is the only way to ensure a sustainable recovery.

**3. We must recognize that famines are political crises that require political solutions.**

Famines are human-made crises resulting from governance failures, including climate change. Frontline services and programs can address the immediate drivers of famine and provide a lifesaving first line of defence. However, averting famine sustainably can only be achieved through political action that translates into better governance and greater and longer-term financial commitments across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

**UNICEF commits to leading an urgent, integrated, and multi-sectoral response to famine prevention and response that places children, women and vulnerable populations at the center, combining immediate lifesaving interventions with sustainable actions.**

# BACKGROUND

**Every child, every woman, every person has the right to nutrition and today millions of children, women and families live in contexts at risk of famine.**

A combination of poverty, inequities, conflict, climate change and most recently the COVID-19 pandemic have put populations around the world at the risk of famine. Most recently, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Nigeria, South Sudan, and Yemen have experienced crises levels that have pushed their food, nutrition and health systems and indicators to the brink and sometimes beyond.

As a result, we have seen a rapid escalation in the number of food insecurity and child malnutrition crises that can lead to famine conditions. Yet, famines have no place in the modern era. They represent a collective failure that must be acknowledged and addressed through radically different approaches.

This brief sets out the urgent, integrated, multi-sectoral response needed to protect children, women, and populations in crises from further simultaneous deterioration in their food, nutrition, and health conditions. It lays out the multi-dimensional drivers of famine, explaining why our collective response must go beyond food aid and why the words we use to describe food and nutrition crises matter.

Within these pages you will find UNICEF's vision and commitment to leading an urgent, integrated, and multi-sectoral response to famine prevention and response that places children, women and vulnerable populations at the center, combining immediate lifesaving interventions with sustainable actions.

# UNDERSTANDING FAMINE

**At a time of such urgent need, it is critical that the global community's response reflects an adequate understanding of the drivers of famine.** While famine-like situations have often been characterized by food insecurity, their drivers in modern times are never adequately explained in terms of availability of and/or access to food alone. Rather, as the globally agreed definition clearly conveys (*see Text Box*) famines are human-made crises resulting from governance failures, frequently translating into systemic disruptions of food, health, water and sanitation, education and social protection systems; often resulting in conflict, displacement, and lack of humanitarian access; and increasingly compounded by climate change and environmental degradation – which, in turn, impact populations already affected by extreme levels of vulnerability, poverty, and social exclusion.

When famine unfolds, children face the **greatest risk of experiencing severe food deprivation, severe malnutrition, and severe threat of dying.** Famine also forces women, households and communities to adopt negative strategies to cope with deprivation, including the selling of assets and increases in child labor, school dropout, and domestic and gender-based violence.

## WHAT IS FAMINE?

**Words matter, and rarely more so than when it comes to defining what constitutes a famine. Famines have a clear, commonly agreed international definition developed specifically to ensure that the term is adequately used when specific conditions are met.**

**The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) refers to famine as the most severe phase of the IPC Acute Food Insecurity scale (IPC Phase 5). IPC Phase 5 is attributed when in a given area, at least 20% of households are facing an extreme lack of food; and at least 30% of children Under Five are suffering from wasting or other forms of acute malnutrition; and at least two for every 10,000 people are dying each day due to outright starvation or to the interaction of malnutrition and disease.**

# UNICEF'S STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR FAMINE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

**Every child has the right to nutrition. And today, the need for diets, services and practices that protect, promote and support good nutrition has never been greater.** Confronted with the increase in severe child malnutrition, mortality and food insecurity, in some parts of the world, **UNICEF commits to making children living at risk of famine its number one priority in such contexts.** To effectively prevent famines from occurring, we commit to investing in timely, integrated, and multi-sectoral solutions that can be delivered early and at scale. We commit to integrate immediate lifesaving interventions with sustainable actions that place children, women, and vulnerable populations at the center, while pursuing a robust strategy to protect civilians and sustain humanitarian access.

**To achieve this, UNICEF commits to:**

## 1. Bringing everyone together

**To prevent famine, a multi-sectoral approach across the development, humanitarian, and peace continuum is needed,** bringing together governments, civil society, international partners, and United Nations agencies to deliver a coordinated and integrated response when the risk of famine is looming.

As Cluster Lead Agency for **Nutrition and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)**, the lead agency for **Child Protection**, a key cluster partner for **Health** and a lead stakeholder in **Social Protection** across contexts, UNICEF is uniquely positioned to lead integrated, multi-sectoral efforts to prevent and respond to famines. UNICEF works in both development and humanitarian contexts and, thus, can lead efforts to put into practice the humanitarian-development nexus.

UNICEF's conflict sensitive and peacebuilding approach to programming helps ensure that our programmes are equipped to be more effective, do no harm and contribute to peace in conflict-affected and fragile settings. To make a difference, we work to scale up programmes that build and sustain peace, and reduce need, risk and vulnerability of most affected children, women, and families.



*UNICEF commits to lead and coordinate national and sub-national Nutrition and WASH responses and convene and participate as required in integrated multi-sectoral coordination for famine prevention and response across key sectors.*



## 2. Ensuring that earlier warning leads to earlier actions

**Conditions of severe food insecurity, child malnutrition, and mortality and therefore increased risk of famine are predictable several months before humanitarian needs escalate.** Early warning of increasing child malnutrition and food insecurity – through surveillance, real time monitoring or forecasting – provides critical information to inform decisions on where to focus resources and scale up interventions that prevent malnutrition and excess deaths.

But early warning means little without early action. Information from early warning mechanisms must be periodically reviewed and used to plan for, fund and launch anticipatory action that addresses the needs and risks identified in a targeted manner, particularly those of children, women and vulnerable communities and populations.

*UNICEF commits to leading efforts to improve and expand the use of early warning mechanisms for detection of risk of famine through nutrition and other multi-sectoral lenses and ensuring that it informs the response to the threat of famine by UNICEF and the Nutrition and WASH Clusters. We also endorse global efforts from the Crisis Lookout Coalition to ensure better risk planning, pre-arranged finance, and better protection for the most vulnerable communities. We commit to championing these proposals and doing all in our power to prevent the catastrophic impact of disaster and famine well in advance.*



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### 3.

## Implementing comprehensive programmatic responses that work

**Famine is a political and humanitarian response failure which can only be avoided with integrated and multisectoral political and humanitarian action.** No single intervention has the power to stop food and nutrition crises from becoming famines, so our responses must be multi-sectoral and integrated whilst remaining focused: focused on what we know works to avert famine and focused on what can be delivered in these contexts.

After years of experience, we know what works:

- **Investing in essential nutrition, health, water, hygiene and sanitation interventions works.** Children living in settings affected by famine or famine-like conditions are more likely to die if they suffer from malnutrition – particularly severe wasting and other forms of severe acute malnutrition, common illnesses like diarrhea, respiratory infections, malaria and measles, and/or lack of access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. Prevention, early detection, and treatment of child wasting is paramount to reduce child mortality in famine situations.
- **Investing in social protection and humanitarian cash works.** Strengthening shock responsive social protection systems and ensuring timely access to cash transfers shields families from the worst economic impacts of a crisis. It helps them and their children access nutritious and safe foods, benefit from essential health, nutrition and water and sanitation services, and maintain positive standards of child feeding and care and maternal and child nutrition, including during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- **Investing in child protection monitoring and response works.** Interventions in child protection and prevention of gender-based violence play an important role in addressing the negative coping mechanisms that affect famine-hit communities, contributing to longer-term recovery.
- **Investing in food assistance works.** In fragile contexts where livelihoods and markets have been severely disrupted, well-designed and delivered food assistance interventions can offer a direct and impactful way of protecting children, families and communities from famine.
- **Investing in data and information works.** Timely data and information can mobilize early action, but also identify hot spots at the subnational level to prioritize the use of available resources and make them as effective, efficient and equitable as they can be.
- **Investing in localized, sub-national responses works.** The shocks faced by populations and their resilience to these shocks varies in contexts at risk of famine. Developing localized response plans that acknowledge these variations, and in particular the marginalization and vulnerability of specific populations, is key to ensuring impactful responses to prevent famine.
- **Investing in coordination is key to making everything else work.** As Cluster Lead Agency for Nutrition and WASH, we have seen first-hand the importance of effective coordination mechanisms in maximizing the impact of responses to protect people from famines.

*UNICEF commits to proven responses that are implemented at scale and concurrently in support of children, women and populations facing famine. We call on all partners to endorse this integrated, multi-sectoral approach, ensuring famine responses happen early and go beyond immediate food assistance.*



## 4.

### Mobilizing political and financial action locally and globally

#### **Programmatic solutions in isolation won't be enough.**

Political action is required to uphold human rights and humanitarian law: to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure and ensure humanitarian access.

#### **Famines are political crises that require political solutions.**

Famines are human-made crises resulting from governance failures, including climate change. Frontline services and programs can address the immediate drivers of famine and provide a lifesaving first line of defense. However, averting famine sustainably can only be achieved through political action that translates into better governance and greater and longer-term financial commitments across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus.

#### **Famines are a failure of national and international systems to protect populations already in crises**

from experiencing a drastic deterioration of their food, nutrition and health conditions among children and women. We need every stakeholder to ensure that international humanitarian law is upheld to protect humanitarian staff – both national and international – guarantee humanitarian access to the worst affected populations, and protect children, women and vulnerable communities against famine.

#### **Political action must translate into a greater investment in conflict prevention and resolution.**

Conflicts are the leading cause of humanitarian crises globally. Ten out of 13 of the

world's most severe crises in 2021 are driven by conflict. Progress in most countries affected by conflict has stagnated or reversed. If we want to protect children, women and their communities from the devastation of famine, we need to invest in child-inclusive peacebuilding locally, nationally and internationally.

**Political action must translate into financial actions.** Resources to prevent and respond to famines remain too reactive, too narrowly focused, and too short to empower governments and their partners to implement timely, impactful and sustainable responses. Efforts to improve anticipatory, multi-year funding for famine prevention and response that make the humanitarian-development nexus a reality must be expanded to produce more flexible and predictable funding arrangements.

**Political action must also translate into greater action on climate change.** The effects of climate change are exacerbating pressure on natural resources, loss of livelihoods, and conflict. Current trends predict that these climate-related shocks will only get worse in years to come. Therefore, political action must therefore also translate into greater action on climate change, including greater support for climate-adaptation of national systems critical to the prevention of famine and urgent action on carbon reduction.



*UNICEF commits to working with partners and member states to strengthen and improve access to flexible and predictable funding to prevent and mitigate famines, ensure timely and unrestricted access to vulnerable populations, and invest in conflict resolution at local, national and global levels to strengthen governance, social cohesion and peace building.*