



ST4N POLICY BRIEF

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# Global Food Crisis Impact on Child Wasting in Vulnerable Communities

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## Summary

- New ST4N and IFPRI analysis on over twenty years of data demonstrates that the global food crisis is likely to dramatically increase the number of children suffering from wasting—a lethal form of malnutrition. On average, a five percent increase in the real price of food will increase the risk of wasting by nine percent.
- Coming on top of the pandemic and multiple economic, climate and conflict shocks, the global food price crisis will mostly impact children and women in low- and middle-income countries.
- This crisis will affect the most vulnerable, particularly mothers and children who live in poor households and in rural communities, and those in households that do not own farmland and cannot grow their own food.
- The current analysis calls for immediate action by global leaders to scale up life-saving nutrition interventions through urgent humanitarian assistance and to strengthen the nutrition resilience of populations facing food crises to prevent the devastating intergenerational impacts of malnutrition.

## Recommendations for Action

1. Scale-up humanitarian assistance to ensure critical health and nutrition services reach the most vulnerable mothers and children facing food crises.
2. Strengthen health and social protection systems to help prevent all forms of malnutrition and support population resilience in the face of future shocks.
3. Support new investments and actions that improve the accessibility and affordability of nutrient-rich and varied foods.
4. Prioritize the collection and analysis of nutrition data in real time to ensure policies and actions are aligned with the nutrition needs of target populations.

## Context

The current global food crisis, driven by the war in Ukraine, is expected to disproportionately impact vulnerable children in low- and middle-income countries. As food prices rise, families significantly reduce overall food intake and particularly, the consumption of more costly nutrient dense foods such as animal source foods, pulses, and vegetables—leading to a rise in all forms of undernutrition. Food crises particularly affect vulnerable pregnant and lactating women and children given their high overall nutrient needs, impairing the physical growth, cognitive development and immune systems of children, and lower school and economic productivity.

In contexts experiencing acute food insecurity or sudden food shocks, a serious concern is the risk of severe child wasting—a lethal form of child malnutrition. Wasting or acute malnutrition, which is severe weight loss (low weight for height), compromises immunity and leads to a high risk of death from otherwise common childhood illnesses such as diarrhea and infections.

Children with severe wasting (severe acute malnutrition) are 11 times more likely to die than healthy children<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, severe wasting has increased since 2016 and currently South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa have the highest levels. Limited access to health and nutrition services, inadequate quantity and quality of foods, suboptimal feeding practices for infants and young children, and poor sanitary conditions are the leading drivers of wasting<sup>2</sup>.

The ongoing global food crisis comes on top of already dire global child malnutrition statistics, with approximately 1 in 2 children affected by at least one micronutrient deficiency<sup>3</sup> and over 45 million children suffer from wasting<sup>4</sup>. The urgency to reach the most vulnerable mothers and children to ensure access to nutritious diets is critical to protect the future of a generation of children. Adequate nutrition both saves lives and prevents against the long-term devastating impacts of poor nutrition on cognitive development—enabling children to reach their full potential through education and improved productivity.



WASTING

## NUMBERS AFFECTED

Global wasting prevalence 2020: **6.7%**

Global severe wasting prevalence 2020: **2.0%**

Global number affected by wasting 2020: **45.4 M**

Global number affected by severe wasting 2020: **13.6 M**

### More than half of all children affected by wasting live in Southern Asia

Number (millions) of children under 5 affected by wasting, by United Nations sub-region, 2020<sup>1</sup>

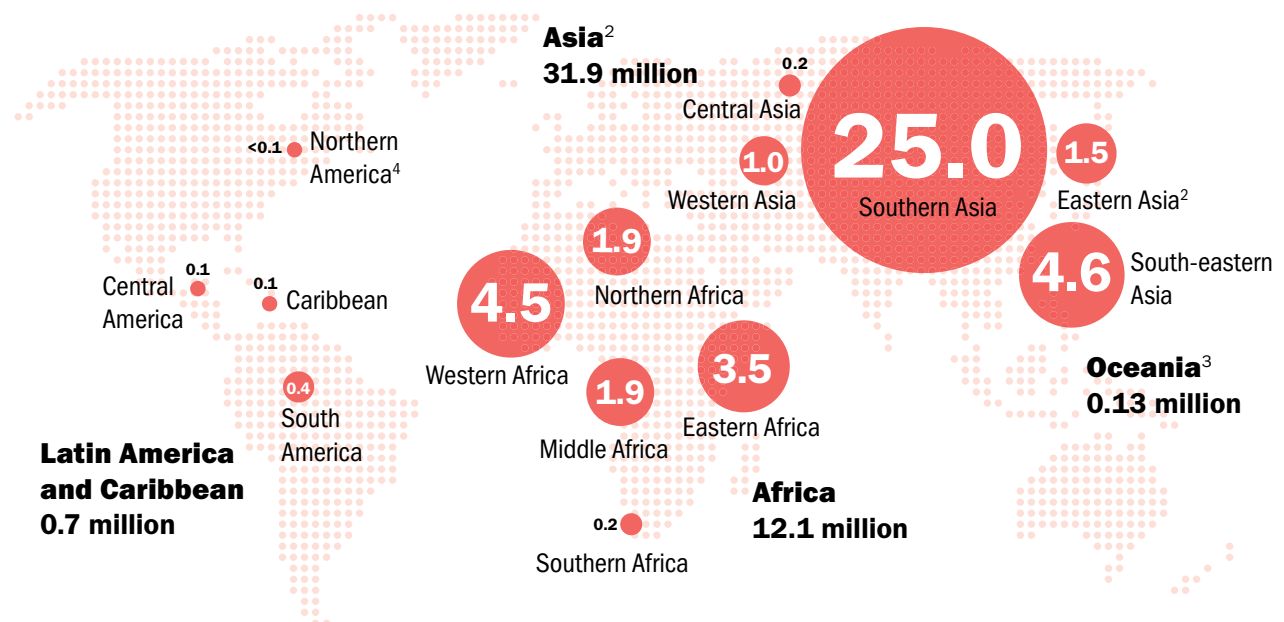


Figure 1. UNICEF / WHO / World Bank Group Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates 2021: Global prevalence of wasting by region<sup>5</sup>

## High Food Prices and Child Wasting

To understand the effect of food price increases on child malnutrition, an innovative data analysis by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) linked data from 130 Demographic Health Surveys, conducted over a twenty-year period between 2000 and 2021 in 44 low- and middle-income countries with national level FAO price index data. The analysis studied the increased risk of childhood wasting three months after a short-term food price increase, that was larger than increases in overall inflation. The analysis included data on over 1.27 million children under five years of age.

Results showed a strong link between food price inflation and moderate to severe wasting. **Specifically, a food price increase as small as five percent over a period of three months, dramatically increased the risk of children suffering from moderate or severe wasting by as much as nine percent<sup>6</sup>.**

The impact was much larger in particular sub-population groups. The risk of wasting from food inflation is about 1.5 times higher for children in households that are asset-poor compared to children in non-poor households<sup>6</sup>. In rural areas, children in households that do not own land and cannot grow their own food

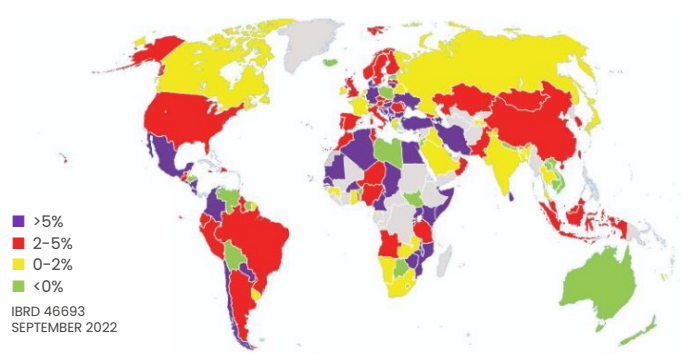


**Figure 2.** Food price inflation dramatically impacts wasting: a five percent rise in food inflation equals a nine percentage increase in risk of moderate/severe wasting

are more likely to suffer from wasting than households owning land. This is the first study to rigorously demonstrate the strong link between food inflation and wasting on a global scale<sup>7</sup>.

## Current Global High Food Prices

A recent FAO analysis on quarterly food price increases indicates rising food prices throughout 2022 with the first quarter experiencing a 13.1% increase from the prior quarter followed by a further increase in the second quarter of 18.3%<sup>8</sup>, signaling a looming threat to the nutritional well-being of mothers and an alarming risk for an increase in child wasting, the most immediate and serious form of malnutrition. Figure 3 shows the hotspots, where over 25 low and middle countries are currently experiencing food price inflation of over five percent (in purple). Many children in countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Central America are particularly vulnerable to the increased risk of wasting due to reliance on imported food, unprecedented climate events, such as the recent catastrophic flooding in Pakistan, or on-going conflicts, such as Yemen and Ethiopia.



**Figure 3.** Changes in real food prices, latest 12-month values recorded over May-August 2022

Source: World Bank <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/40ebbf38f5a6b68bfc11e5273e1405d4-0090012022/related/Food-Security-Update-LXIX-September-15-2022.pdf>

Note: Food inflation for each country is based on the latest month from May to August 2022 for which the food component of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and overall CPI data are available. Real food inflation is defined as food inflation minus overall inflation.

\* Households' wealth was based on five assets: improved flooring, electricity, TV, fridge, and car/motorbike. Households were classified into three levels of ownership: no assets (poor), some assets, all five assets. See Headey D. & Ruel M. (2022) Food inflation increases the risk of wasting in low- and middle-income countries, The International Food Policy Research Institute.



## Nutrition Resilience—Protecting Vulnerable Communities Against Food Crises

Households, communities, and countries, already reeling from the harsh impacts of the COVID-19 global pandemic on incomes and health, now face a protracted period of high food prices that will reduce access to healthy, nutrient-rich diets. Moreover, as food prices rise, so do the prices of commodities used for specialized nutritious foods required to treat and prevent child wasting, such as ready-to-use supplementary and therapeutic food products. In some cases, these therapeutic foods have experienced inflation as high as 75%<sup>9</sup>.

Country and regional hunger hotspots, vulnerable to imported food prices, have reduced financial capacity to cushion the food price shock and reduced capacity to build resilient systems in the face of severe climate events and ongoing crises.

The current analysis sheds critical light on the devastating blow that high food crises have on the vulnerable and young. With over twenty years of data on the harm that such crises have on children's lives and futures, the analysis also highlights the need to protect against further deepening humanitarian impacts.

In line with urgent appeals<sup>10</sup> from the global advocacy community, **prioritizing urgent humanitarian assistance and scaling up of essential nutrition services and interventions** is critical in contexts already facing a high burden of wasting to protect the lives of millions of vulnerable children as they now face prolonged periods of inadequate access to nutrient-rich diets. As climate crises, including droughts and erratic weather shocks, continue to rise and disproportionately impact already fragile communities, **strengthening social protection systems to be shock-responsive** and meet nutrition needs through food, non-food, and cash assistance must be in lockstep with humanitarian investments.

**Strengthening health systems** to better support early detection and treatment of wasting and the prevention of all forms of undernutrition across both emergency and non-emergency contexts, including with micronutrient supplements, requires both policy prioritization and new investments and actions. In addition, this demands an adequate supply of life-saving nutrition therapeutic foods for scaling up of programs that target the most vulnerable communities experiencing high levels of food insecurity.

Recommendations outlined in the [Global Action Plan for Child Wasting](#) (UNICEF, WFP, FAO, UNHCR) for the prevention of malnutrition include improving maternal nutrition to reduce the risk for babies born with low birth weight, reducing the risk of infectious diseases

that deteriorate nutritional status by providing access to safe foods, water and sanitation; and the promotion of exclusive and continued breastfeeding, and dietary diversity in early childhood<sup>11</sup>.

Strengthening the nutrition resilience of vulnerable communities to protect against future food crises requires **re-doubling our commitments to transform food systems that can increase access and affordability of nutrient rich foods, particularly the improvement of diets in early childhood**, as highlighted in UNICEF's 2021 [Fed to Fail Report](#)<sup>12</sup>.

Lastly, limited and inadequate data to help guide programs and track progress is hindering progress. **Investments and systems that can provide real-time data on child nutrition status** are essential, particularly in crises contexts, to help target and design effective programs for the most vulnerable, and considering stretched resources.



### Call to Action

We can and must learn from the past. The evidence on the link between high food price crises and child wasting calls for the immediate scale up of nutrition investments and humanitarian actions. We must protect and nourish the most vulnerable mothers and children experiencing high levels of food and nutrition insecurity during the current global high food price crisis<sup>13</sup>. Achieving progress towards global nutrition targets, including the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, will ultimately depend on our ability to strengthen the nutrition resilience of communities and nations. The time to act is now.



**Standing Together for Nutrition (ST4N)**—A multidisciplinary consortium of leading nutrition, gender, economic, health, and food system experts examining the scale and reach of global economic, climate, and health shocks and their adverse impact on nutrition for millions of vulnerable women and children. ST4N is a program hosted by the Micronutrient Forum.

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## Micronutrient Forum 6th Global Conference

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