



**Reducing malnutrition and child  
starvation in Central and  
East-African countries**



**AU-PSC**

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## Introduction

Malnutrition and child starvation is a key issue in the West and Central African region which limits both the health and well-being of millions living there. Not only does this have a devastating impact on the nations in this region, but it also has a significant global impact. As per the seventeen sustainable development goals set forward by the United Nations in 2015, the issue at hand provides challenges for goals 2 (zero hunger), 3 (good health and well-being) and 10 (reduced inequality). Approximately two out of every three households in West and Central Africa cannot afford to eat a healthy diet. In addition, eight out of ten children between the ages of six to twenty-three months do not consume the minimum number of food groups that are necessary for their healthy growth and development. With millions of people going hungry, their life expectancy and cognitive ability are limited. In addition, the global development gap is widened with such countries falling behind even more when compared with rapidly developing or developed nations.

These issues caused by a lack of food for the population call for high maternal and child mortality rates. Not only is this a concerning social issue, it is also an economic limitation as it reduces the workforce and economic productivity. If people are unable to work or work at low efficiency, then they are less able to bring home money or make products to sell. This can impact future generations and trap them in a never-ending cycle of poverty and malnutrition. This calls for immediate action and worldwide cooperation to ensure that the issue is resolved as quickly and effectively as possible.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Malnutrition

Inadequate food intake or insufficient consumption of the right sort of food causing a state of poor health.

### **Sustainable development goals**

Set of seventeen goals made by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to ensure that by 2030 issues such as poverty are resolved and peace, prosperity and environmental care are maintained.

### **Food insecurity**

Lack of safe and nutritious food that meets one's needs for normal growth and development for a healthy and active life.

### **Sanitation**

Sanitation is the practice of maintaining hygiene and cleanliness in order to stop the spread of illness. It is vital to public health because it keeps the environment clean and enhances general well-being.

### **Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)**

Voluntary group or institution with a social mission that operates independently from the government.

### **Horn of Africa**

Region of 4 nations (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia) on the west coast of Africa forming a horn shape.

### **Kwashiorkor**

A disease caused by severe protein malnutrition > Mostly affects children from 0 to 5 years of age.

### **Stunting**

reduced development and growth in children as a result of inadequate nutrition.

### **Anemia**

Disease caused by not having a sufficient amount of red blood cells caused by iron deficiency.

### **Acute malnutrition**

Severe deficiency of nutrition over a short period of time leading to considerable weight loss and health complications. Children that suffer from this have low weight for their height.

### **Infant mortality rate**

The statistic entailing the number of infant deaths (children between the age of 0 to 12 months) per 1,000 live births in a specific time period. It is a key indication for the health of a population and it reflects the risks and conditions affecting newborns.

### **Maternal mortality rate**

The measure of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in a given time period. It shows the risk of death associated with childbirth and pregnancy.

### **Humanitarian actors**

A wide range of organizations, agencies and inter-agency networks that work to ensure international assistance when it comes to reducing suffering and improving people's lives in places where it is needed.

### **Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)**

A specialized agency in the United Nations was founded in 1945 which aims to defeat hunger on an international scale by increasing agricultural productivity and living conditions for rural populations.

### **United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF)**

Established in 1946 in the aftermath of World War two to provide emergency food and healthcare to children and mothers who were heavily impacted by the war. Nowadays it works on a wider scale providing for children at all times.

### **Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)**

Part of the United Nations Secretariat which is in charge of the co-operation of humanitarian actors to make sure that there is a quick and easy response to emergencies around the world. It collects and analyzes information so it can provide an overview of needs and responses when devastating events occur.

### **Sahel**

It is the central African region consisting of nations between the Sahara Desert in the North and the tropical savannas to the South.

## **General Overview**

NGOs such as UNICEF, FAO, OCHA and the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) work to reduce malnutrition and child starvation in the Western and Central African region alongside the help of both donor nations and ordinary people. However, there are challenges when it comes to facing this issue as there are more than a couple reasons why this challenge is so prevalent.

### **Food insecurity**

Climate change has been a root cause of increasing food insecurity in the region. For instance, the heavy rainfall witnessed by these regions in July of 2022 led to major floods that caused widespread damage. They affected about five million in 19 different countries across both West and Central Africa ruining many hectares of cropland. It also meant that crops could not be grown during the rainy period as the land was heavily waterlogged. In recent years, the frequency and strength of

storms and torrential rain have increased and will continue to do so due to the greenhouse effect and its impact on the climate. In addition, such weather disasters also inflate food prices putting many in a vulnerable position where they are unable to purchase the correct portion or type of food.

### **Poverty and population growth**

Poverty is a widespread issue in such regions of Africa with population growth increasing the already high numbers. As per a study by UNICEF, the African population will double by 2050, adding additional pressure to food and nutrition. As there is greater demand for food, there is an insufficient increase in the supply due to a lack of expertise and infrastructure to produce food at a greater scale. This has led to an increase in the price of main foods such as rice, vegetable oil and corn, causing the cost of a daily nutritious diet to be 110 percent higher than the daily minimum wage in the region of central Sahel. In addition, there is little room to develop such infrastructure as most of the population is poor and stuck in a trade structure that does not benefit them. More affluent nations are protecting their economies by imposing high agricultural tariffs which slows development in Western and Central African regions as most of their income is made by exporting commodities to such nations. If there is less need for such exported goods due to their inflated prices, less money comes to such regions increasing poverty which directly correlates to an increase in malnutrition and starvation as people do not have enough money to feed themselves.

### **Conflict and instability**

Conflict is the main reason for the issue of hunger in the region with the Central African Republic (nation in central Africa) conflict displacing 1.4 million people from their homes. This put stress on the populations of neighboring countries to provide food for the immigrants. In addition, there is intervention in the NIACs in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, and Somalia by western powers of Africa. NIACs are prolonged armed engagements between state armed forces and the forces of one or more armed groups. It can also be conflict emerging within the territory of a state between armed groups. Civil strife in these regions has stemmed from issues relating to poverty, human rights violations, bad governance (including corruption) and a rapid increase in light weapons in West Africa. Essentially all this internal conflict has disrupted food production as areas are either unsafe for farmers to grow food or are unsuitable to do so because of the pollution associated with the fighting. In addition, this has also limited access to humanitarian aid for poorer populations as associations are unable to help in dangerous areas as they would be putting their workforce at risk.

### **Water and sanitation issues**

Sanitation including clean potable water, adequate toilets and good hygienic environments are key for the survival and development of children. West and Central Africa, unfortunately, is lacking in this department with it being the only region where people practicing open defecation is increasing. This is where people use alternatives for restrooms such as streams, bushes or rivers when they need to use the toilet. It is a direct cause of contaminating agricultural lands used for growing crops. Not only can this affect their nutritional quality, but it can also impact their safety when consumed by people and spread malnutrition. In this region, sanitation is an issue in homes and a challenge in public areas along with schools and health centers. Child sanitation is especially poor with less than 50 percent of schools having access to water. Millions consume untreated or polluted water which has a significant risk for waterborne diseases such as cholera which is a major cause of child death and illness. It is also strongly linked to malnutrition as such illnesses can cause nutrient loss, dehydration and poor absorption of nutrients from food. Such illnesses also make sufferers amenable to infections and weakens their immune system. A lack of sanitation facilities such as sinks or hand soap dispensers can cause poor hygiene practices which can spread disease in food via means such as but not limited to not washing hands. Such diseases can worsen the effect of having little food and cause malnutrition.

### **Poor education**

Education is key to the prevention of starvation and food-related illnesses. For instance, it is vital to promote sanitation and improve agricultural knowledge as it can reduce the likelihood of food shortages or diseases that might lead to malnutrition. In addition, a lack of education for women as a result of sexism in Western and Central African cultures can cause mothers to know less about themselves and their children in terms of nutrition. This can mean little knowledge of balanced diets, key nutrients, breastfeeding and do's along with don'ts during pregnancy. This can worsen their health directly and it can impact maternal health whilst carrying the child (which affects both parties). How far you go in terms of studies also plays a key role in determining your income. As the literacy rate in West and Central Africa is quite low; at a respective 67.5% and 54%, many families remain poor as they cannot access high-paying jobs. This often means increased poverty across the region resulting in malnutrition and child starvation as people do not have the power to purchase the right amount of foods/nutrients their body needs.

### **Lack of social safety nets**

Social safety nets are programs and policies made to protect people and families that are particularly economically weak and at risk of issues relating to poverty. Such regions lack these schemes as a

result of bad governments that are not willing to invest in the poor, or governments that simply do not have enough funding to do so. These systems can provide financial support or food directly to the poorest which helps them feed themselves and their families. With more access to the nutrition that people need, they are in a better position to avoid issues such as malnutrition or starvation. Poverty is directly connected to these challenges and such schemes are key for its reduction. However, as these are not present, people are often stuck within a cycle of intergenerational poverty they cannot escape as they are not granted additional support. This can make regions such as the Western and Central areas of Africa experience more issues relating to hunger.

## Timeline of Key Events

Date	Event
Late 19 <sup>th</sup> – Mid 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries	Colonial Era
1970s	Severe droughts in Sahel region
1959	Blood sample taken to get the first ever case of human HIV-1 in Congo (Central Africa)
2014-2016	Ebola Outbreak
2009 - 2021	Conflict with Boko Haram in Nigeria
2020 - present	Cover-19 Pandemic

## Major Parties Involved

### FAO

The body which leads international efforts to end hunger so it calls on the respective governments and financial partners to introduce and promote programs that can strengthen climate-resilient food systems.

### UNICEF

Works with FAO, WFP and OCHA to help the world's most disadvantaged children and tries to reduce and prevent child starvation in West and Central Africa. Has made efforts to try and improve the management of national resources in the region (such as water), which prove essential for reducing malnourishment.

### OCHA

Aims to start social food provision schemes to protect vulnerable groups such as children and women. Collaborates with other organizations to achieve this goal.

### **World Food Program (WFP)**

Trying to get support from the private sector as well as other organizations to strengthen food security in the region by means such as but not limited to building food and hygiene systems. Work alongside all other organizations mentioned above. Also donated 9.4 million USD in West African countries to help them recover from a devastating drought in 2021.

### **The world bank**

Mobilizing aid for nations at risk of issues related to hunger in the Sahel and West African region.

### **Economic Community of West Africa states**

Has been involved in trying to stop conflict in the West African region by deploying peacekeepers and helping draft and sign peace agreements.

## **Possible Solutions**

Reducing malnutrition and child starvation in the West and Central African region is a very complex issue that is hard to solve quickly. However, there are some initiatives that can be taken to speed the process of dealing with this issue. A few key ideas to rid the challenges that cause issues to do with hunger are listed below.

### **Improving education**

Education and especially nutritional awareness would be key to informing people of the region what to eat and what not to eat. The promotion of nutrient-rich foods will also allow for fewer deficiency diseases. In addition, childbirth and pregnancies will also be better with women having more knowledge on what to eat for a healthy child and how to breastfeed, allowing for more successful delivery. Education can be improved by workshops done for the public or by health studies being a part of the curriculum in schools.

### **Agricultural development**

If agricultural productivity is reliable and sustainable, then the issue would be far less severe and more manageable. To allow for this to happen, climate-resistant crops could be introduced or



supported so that food is available no matter the weather conditions. Another way of dealing with the issue would be to support farmers financially and provide them with the right equipment to allow for better and quicker harvesting.

### **Improving healthcare and sanitation**

Healthcare and sanitation both are essential in the prevention of malnutrition. This is because having better hospitals and treatment can cure many illnesses that further cause issues with health when it comes to food. Children can also be made immune to diseases making them less vulnerable to falling sick and malnourished when in need of care and nutrition. Improving cleanliness and sanitation will also reduce the spread of waterborne diseases and prevent crops from getting infected (that can harm those who consume it). This solution can be implemented by promoting hygienic practices in schools or advertisements on television or radio so that it is available for a majority of the western and central African population to see. To improve healthcare, the government can increase its spending on the sector with the aid it receives from foreign nations.

### **International collaboration**

International collaboration is vital to tackle the issue of malnutrition and child starvation. This is because many nations in this region are still developing or underdeveloped with low incomes and are unable to attend to the long list of issues they have. With other, more affluent nations helping them, they will be in a position to support their populations and provide better services in terms of education, healthcare, sanitation and overall development which can reduce food-related issues. For this to happen, conferences can be held and relations can be formed.

### **Legislation and policy-making**

Laws and policies implemented by local governments can be vital in stopping further damage caused by malnutrition. This is because new policies and strategies can provide a safety net for the poorest so they can rely on something when they are in the most dire situations. For instance, there can be food provision services for children in families below a certain household wage so that they are given an opportunity to have nutrient-rich meals. In addition, laws can also be introduced that prioritize nutrition and child health so that it isn't compromised by governments when looking over their populations.

### **Improving emergency responsiveness**

Developing strategies to respond to unpredictable environmental events can be majorly helpful in preventing starvation and malnutrition as there climate hazards are often the reason for a drop in food production. Systems can be put in place that deal with droughts, conflict or acute floods so that people are less vulnerable to such events. These can include, evacuation plans, flood relieving systems, afforestation and better prediction technology so these incidents can be prepared for well in time. This can be done through the sharing of information and technology between more developed nations so that they can support the less affluent Western and Central African ones who must cope with hunger and malnourishment following disastrous events.

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