

PRESS RELEASE

Urgent action needed as acute malnutrition threatens the lives of millions of vulnerable children

GENEVA, NEW YORK, ROME, 12 January 2023 - United Nations agencies are calling for urgent action to protect the most vulnerable children in the 15 countries hardest hit by an unprecedented food and nutrition crisis.

Conflict, climate shocks, the ongoing impacts of COVID-19, and rising costs of living are leaving increasing numbers of children acutely malnourished while key health, nutrition and other life-saving services are becoming less accessible. Currently, more than 30 million children in the 15 worst-affected countries suffer from wasting – or acute malnutrition – and 8 million of these children are severely wasted, the deadliest form of undernutrition. This is a major threat to children’s lives and to their long-term health and development, the impacts of which are felt by individuals, their communities and their countries.

In response, five UN agencies - the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) - are calling for accelerated progress on the [Global Action Plan on Child Wasting](#). It aims to prevent, detect and treat acute malnutrition among children in the worst-affected countries, which are Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, the Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, the Sudan and Yemen.

The *Global Action Plan* addresses the need for a multi-sectoral approach and highlights priority actions across maternal and child nutrition through the food, health, water and sanitation, and social protection systems. In response to increasing needs, the UN agencies identified [five priority actions](#) that will be effective in addressing acute malnutrition in countries affected by conflict and natural disasters and in humanitarian emergencies. Scaling up these actions as a coordinated package will be critical for preventing and treating acute malnutrition in children, and averting a tragic loss of life.

The UN agencies call for decisive and timely action to prevent this crisis from becoming a tragedy for the world’s most vulnerable children. All agencies urge for greater investment in support of a coordinated UN response that will meet the unprecedented needs of this growing crisis, before it is too late.

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*“This situation is likely to deteriorate even further in 2023,” said **QU Dongyu**, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. “We must ensure availability, affordability and accessibility of healthy diets for young children, girls, and pregnant and lactating women. We need urgent action now to save lives, and to tackle the root causes of acute malnutrition, working together across all sectors.”* Qu said.

“The UN system is responding as one to this crisis and the UN Global Action Plan on Child Wasting is our joint effort to prevent, detect and treat wasting globally. At UNHCR we are working hard to improve analysis and targeting to ensure that we reach children who are most

at risk, including internally displaced and refugees populations.” **Filippo Grandi**, High Commissioner, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

“Today’s cascading crises are leaving millions of children wasted and have made it harder for them to access key services. Wasting is painful for the child, and in severe cases, can lead to death or permanent damage to children’s growth and development. We can and must turn this nutrition crisis around through proven solutions to prevent, detect, and treat child wasting early.” **Catherine Russell**, Executive Director, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

“More than 30 million children are acutely malnourished across the 15 worst-affected countries, so we must act now and we must act together. It is critical that we collaborate to strengthen social safety nets and food assistance to ensure Specialized Nutritious Foods are available to women and children who need them the most.” **David Beasley**, Executive Director, World Food Programme (WFP)

“The global food crisis is also a health crisis, and a vicious cycle: malnutrition leads to disease, and disease leads to malnutrition,” said **Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO). “Urgent support is needed now in the hardest hit countries to protect children’s lives and health, including ensuring critical access to healthy foods and nutrition services, especially for women and children.”

Note to the editor:

Wasting or acute malnutrition is a form of undernutrition caused by a decrease in food consumption and/or illness that results in sudden weight loss or oedema. Children with acute malnutrition have low weight for height. They may also have nutritional oedema and other related pathological clinical signs.

Children with acute malnutrition have weakened immune systems and are at higher risk of dying from common childhood diseases. Those that survive could face lifelong growth and development challenges. They risk facing a future marked by illness, poor school results, and poverty with ripple effects across generations.

Child wasting - defined as low weight for height - is the most dangerous form of undernutrition. Severe wasting is the deadliest form, as severely wasted children are 12 times more likely to die than a well-nourished child.

For more information:

Please visit www.childwasting.org for more information, including:

- Call to Action video
- Call to Action outlining the 5 priority actions
- The Global Action Plan on Child Wasting Framework for Action and country roadmaps

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