

### GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS AND THE ISSUE OF CHILD MALNUTRITION IN PAKISTAN

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



During the UN Economic and Social Council Meeting, 2022, Amina Mohammed UN Deputy Secretary-General stated that “there is no doubt that much of the developing world, supported by the United Nations system, bilateral and other partners, made significant progress in enhancing food supplies and reducing hunger over the past 25 years. But, more recently, we have seen global hunger on the rise, reversing decades of progress. Climate change, extreme weather events, conflicts and economic downturns are some of the factors driving growing food insecurity”.<sup>1</sup> The Deputy-General further stated that some 193 million people experienced food insecurity across 53 countries or territories in 2021. Acute food insecurity is at a record high. The ripple effects of the conflict in Ukraine are extending human suffering far beyond its borders, threatening global hunger on an unprecedented scale.

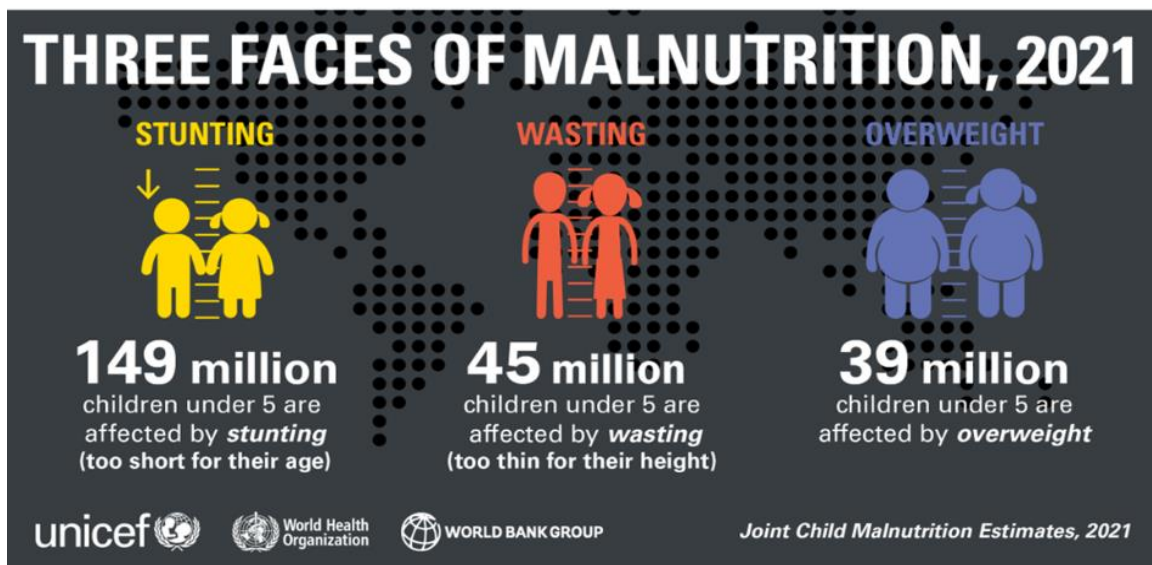
The UNICEF Child Alert Study reports that soaring food prices due to the Ukraine-Russia war, climate shocks and Covid 19 have wreaked havoc on the families’ ability to feed their children. According to this study, currently, at least 10 million severely wasted children – or 2 in 3 – do not have access to

<sup>1</sup> World Facing Unprecedented Hunger Crisis, Deputy Secretary-General Warns Economic and Social Council, Urging Governments to Support Resilience at Scale.  
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2022/dsgsm1752.doc.htm>

the most effective treatment for wasting, ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF). The situation will exacerbate with the ongoing conflict.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The State of Malnutrition Worldwide***

Malnutrition accounts for at least half of all childhood deaths worldwide. Inadequate nutrition among mothers during pregnancy is one of the main reasons of malnutrition among children leading to stunting. Stunting does not only mean that a child is not having enough to eat. It is about the quantity and quality of diet besides other factors.



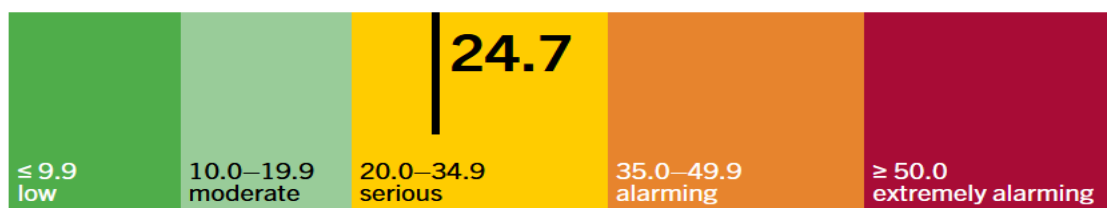
Globally, 149.2 million children under five years of age were stunted in 2020 and Pakistan accounted for a 6.9% share of the global burden. According to the Pakistan Economic Survey, 2021-22, the impact of poor diets and nutrition risk lock individuals and countries into long-term disadvantages. The situation is quite dire in Pakistan, with stunting and wasting heavily prevalent in the country.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 10 million children in Pakistan suffer from stunting. Only 38 per cent of children are exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life. As a result, more than half the children under five years of age are deficient in vitamin A, 40 per cent are deficient in both zinc and vitamin D, and nearly 62 per cent are anaemic. According to the statistics, 8 out of 10 children in Pakistan do not eat the right type and quantity of food.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, about 20.5% of the population is undernourished with half of those being under the age of five years, causing stunted mental and

<sup>2</sup> "Severe wasting: An overlooked child survival emergency", UNICEF CHILD ALERT May 2022. <https://www.unicef.org/media/120346/file/Wasting%20child%20alert.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Asim and Yasir Nawaz, "Child Malnutrition in Pakistan: Evidence from Literature," NIH, May 04, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5977042/>

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF, "Nutrition: Ensuring every child develops to their full potential", UNICEF Pakistan, <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/nutrition-0>

physical growth. Pakistan ranked 92 out of 116 nations in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) in 2021 scoring 24.7, categorising Pakistan's level of hunger as 'serious.'



Source: Global Hunger Index

Multiple surveys and reports also showcase the growing acute food insecurity in Pakistan. The Food Security Assessment Survey (FSA), highlighted that 18% of the population in Pakistan is undernourished; similarly, the National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS) reported a high level of severe stunting at 45 per cent, wasting 15 per cent and underweight 30 percent along with higher malnourishment problems rural areas accounting for 46 per cent and in certain regions like FATA 58 per cent, Gilgit Baltistan 51 percent and Baluchistan 52 per cent with half of the population consuming less than the dietary requirement of Vitamin-A and Iron.

### **Ways to Reduce Malnutritions**

Tackling undernutrition is, as the full extent of malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies becomes apparent, critical for human wellbeing and development.

#### 1. Scale-up direct interventions where they work

Nutrition, while impacted by agricultural productivity, poverty, and income, is unlikely to be improved through more general programmes aimed at bringing about economic and social development. Although many cost-effective nutrition interventions have been tried and tested and shown to reduce the physical signs of malnutrition such as stunting and wasting in children, knowing which interventions will work where and should be scaled up is complex.

#### 2. Prioritise the 1000-day window

In early age, malnutrition can have largely irreversible negative impacts on physical and cognitive development, education, future earning, and mortality. As such it is critical that interventions are directed to the first 1,000 days of a child's existence, from conception to two years old, if the long-term problems associated with childhood malnutrition are to be addressed.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.aidforum.org/topics/food-security/four-ways-to-reduce-malnutrition/>

### 3. Develop healthier food systems

Although countries differ in the characteristics of their “nutrition transition”, in general there is a trade-off between being able to access more food but that food being less nutritious. Sustainable food system should be made up of the environment, people, institutions, and processes by which agricultural products are produced, processed, and brought to consumers.

### 4. Coordinate across governmental sectors

Direct nutrition interventions are undoubtedly important but so too are agricultural production, diversity, and sustainability as well as non-food factors such as health services, women’s education, and access to water. A vast number of factors contribute to a population’s nutrition status, although their relative importance may differ by geographic area and food availability. As such government sectors such as agriculture, health, environment, education, and the economy in general must be on the same page and committed when it comes to tackling nutrition.

## ***Conclusion***

Child malnutrition is generally only a problem of developing and underdeveloped countries. Malnutrition is the fundamental cause of morbidity and mortality among the children. Almost half of the mortality in children around the globe is attributed to undernutrition. It also poses a risk to children’s physical and mental development, which results in poor academic achievement.

Adequate nutrition is indispensable to ensure a strong immune system and proper physical and intellectual development in early childhood. Healthy diets provide a foundation for the development of the physical, cognitive, social, and productive traits of individuals, leading to a more economically productive and socially active nation. Nutrition is multi-scale, multi-sector, and location specific. There is a need for global objectives and policy such as the SDGs to promote the goal of ending malnutrition effectively.