

THE HUNGER VIRUS *MULTIPLIES*: DEADLY RECIPE OF CONFLICT, COVID-19 AND CLIMATE ACCELERATE WORLD HUNGER



An internally displaced woman grills peanuts on the Cesacoba displacement site, near Bangassou, the Central African Republic, March 2021. Following violence in Bangassou in early 2021, thousands of people took refuge at Cesacoba. Credit: Adrienne Surprenant/Oxfam/March2021

A year and a half since the pandemic began, deaths from hunger are outpacing the virus.¹ Ongoing conflict, combined with the economic disruptions of the pandemic and an escalating climate crisis, has deepened poverty and catastrophic food insecurity in the world's hunger hotspots and established strongholds in new epicentres of hunger.

“Before the war, I used to have my own small business, allowing me and my family to live in dignity, but war broke out in my country and took away everything from me. Rising food prices and the loss of my work made me unable to afford the living costs. On some nights, my [five] children have to go to bed hungry.” Wafaa, 38, a mother in Northern Syria

Last year, Oxfam warned in its report “The Hunger Virus” that hunger could prove even more deadly than COVID-19. This year, 20 million more people have been pushed to extreme levels of food insecurity, reaching a total of 155 million people in 55 countries.² Since the pandemic began, the number of people living in famine-like conditions has increased **sixfold** to more than 520,000.³

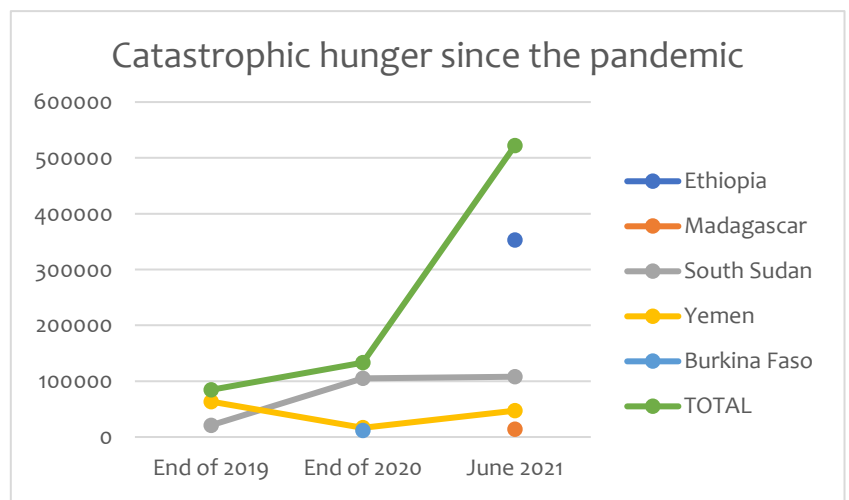
What we saw as a global health crisis has quickly spiralled into an inflamed hunger crisis that has laid bare the stark inequality in our world. The worst is still yet to come unless governments urgently tackle food insecurity and its root causes head on. **Today, 11 people are likely dying every minute from acute hunger linked to three lethal Cs: conflict, COVID-19, and the climate crisis.**⁴ This rate outpaces the current pandemic mortality rate, which is at 7 people per minute.⁵

Conflict was the single largest driver of hunger since the pandemic began, the primary factor pushing nearly 100 million people in 23 conflict-torn countries to crisis or worse levels of food insecurity.⁶ Despite calls for a global ceasefire⁷ to allow the world to focus its attention on battling the pandemic, conflict has gone largely unabated.

Even as governments had to find massive new resource flows to fight the Coronavirus, global military spending rose by 2.7% last year - the equivalent of \$51 billion⁸ - enough to cover the \$7.9 billion 2021 UN humanitarian food security appeal six and a half times over. Arms sales spiralled in some of the most conflict-torn countries battered by hunger.⁹ For instance, Mali increased its arms purchases by 669% since violence escalated in 2012.¹⁰

Catastrophic hunger spiralling

The most severe level of hunger has spiralled since the pandemic. The number of people facing famine-like conditions has drastically increased, reaching 521,814 people across Ethiopia, Madagascar, South Sudan, and Yemen. This is an increase of over 500% since the pandemic started at the end of 2019, when 84,500 people in South Sudan and Yemen were in famine-like conditions. Most of the countries experiencing such catastrophic levels of hunger have witnessed prolonged periods of conflict, violence, and insecurity.



Data is based on IPC 5 figures from the end of 2019 to June 2021. Source: GRFC Report April 2021.

The COVID-19 economic fallout was the second key driver of the global hunger crisis, deepening poverty and exposing the growing inequality around the world. The estimated number of people living in extreme poverty is projected to reach 745 million by the end of

2021, an increase of 100 million since the pandemic started.¹¹ Marginalised groups, especially women, displaced people, and informal workers, have been hit hardest. 2.7 billion people have not received any public financial support to deal with the pandemic's economic devastation.¹²

Meanwhile, the rich continued to get richer during the pandemic. The wealth of the 10 richest people (nine of whom are men) increased by \$413 billion last year – enough to cover the entire UN humanitarian appeal for 2021 more than 11 times over.¹³

The climate crisis was the third significant driver of global hunger this year. Nearly 400 weather related disasters,¹⁴ including record-breaking storms and flooding, continued to intensify for millions across Central America, Southeast Asia, and the Horn of Africa, where communities were already battered by the effects of conflict and COVID-19-related poverty.¹⁵

This brief explores how unabated conflict, economic shocks worsened by the pandemic, and the escalating climate crisis have pushed millions more people into extreme levels of hunger and how that number is likely to continue increasing unless urgent action is taken.

It looks at some of the world's extreme and emerging hunger hotspots since last year's [Hunger Virus report](#), showing that hunger has worsened in almost all of them.

Table 1: Extreme hunger hotspots¹⁶

LOCATION	NUMBER OF PEOPLE (IN MILLIONS) IN CRISIS-LEVEL HUNGER OR WORSE IN 2019	% OF TOTAL POPULATION ANALYZED FACING HUNGER	NUMBER OF PEOPLE (IN MILLIONS) IN CRISIS-LEVEL HUNGER OR WORSE IN 2020	% OF TOTAL POPULATION ANALYZED FACING HUNGER	RISE IN HUNGER %
Yemen*	15.9	53%	13.5	45%	-15%
DRC	15.6	26%	21.8	33%	40%
Afghanistan	11.3	37%	13.2	42%	17%
Venezuela	9.3	32%	No data	NA	NA
West African Sahel** 17	9.0	5%	15.0	7%	67%
Ethiopia	8.0	27%	8.6	16%	8%
South Sudan*	7.0	61%	6.5	55%	-7%
Syria	6.6	36%	12.4	60%	88%
Sudan	5.9	14%	9.6	21%	63%
Haiti	3.7	35%	4.1	40%	11%

Source: Global Report for Food Crises 2021. * The number of people in Yemen and South Sudan who are in crisis level hunger or worse is estimated to have significantly increased in the first half of 2021, with 16.2 million in Yemen and 7.2 million in South Sudan projected to be at this level in June 2021. ** The West African Sahel region covers Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal.

This table highlights the top 10 hunger hotspots based on the number of people experiencing crisis level hunger or worse in each country. The percentage of the population affected is also given, along with percent increase from the end of 2019 to the end of 2020.

In this brief extreme hunger hotspots: Afghanistan, Yemen, the West African Sahel, South Sudan and Venezuela¹⁸, where the food crisis was already worsening, a mix of economic fallout fuelled by the pandemic, conflict and the climate crisis have pushed over 48 million¹⁹ people in those countries alone into crisis level hunger (see Table 1).

Hunger has also intensified in emerging hunger hotspots like Brazil, India and South Africa, which saw some of the sharpest rises in COVID-19 infections, in parallel with a surge in hunger.

Ending hunger is possible. Warring parties must first forge peace, and governments must focus their resources on social protection and programs that address the needs of vulnerable people and save lives now, rather than on arms that perpetuate conflict and hunger. Saving just a day and a half's worth of our global military spending – the equivalent of \$8 billion– would be enough to fund the entire UN emergency food security appeal.²⁰

To end the hunger crisis, governments must also rebuild a fairer and more sustainable global economy as they recover from the pandemic. They must tackle the key drivers of hunger and eradicate underlying inequalities that widen the gap between rich and poor people. This includes supporting smallholder farmers to recover, and building fairer, most sustainable food systems.

To save lives now and in the future, governments must: (1) fully fund the UN's humanitarian appeal, and support a global fund for social protection (2) guarantee humanitarian access in conflict zones and an end to using hunger as weapon of war (3) forge peace by promoting women's participation and leadership in peacebuilding (4) build fairer, more resilient, and more sustainable food systems, (5) ensure women lead the pandemic response and the recovery (6) support a People's Vaccine (7) take urgent action to tackle the climate crisis

THE THREE LETHAL Cs ACCELERATING HUNGER

Three drivers of food insecurity - conflict, economic shocks primarily worsened by COVID-19, and the climate crisis,²¹ have ravaged communities across the world, with conflict remaining the biggest driver for three consecutive years, including during the pandemic.²²

Conflict

Faced with the unprecedented global pandemic of COVID-19, the UN called for a global ceasefire in March 2020. However, conflict has gone largely unabated²³ and is the primary driver of hunger for almost 100 million people across 23 countries - including 22 million more people added just last year.²⁴ Globally, a record 48 million people are now internally displaced as a result of conflict and violence.²⁵

Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, and Yemen – some of the world's worst hunger hotspots - are all torn by conflict.²⁶ More than 350,000 people in Ethiopia's Tigray region are experiencing famine-like conditions between May and June 2021 according to recent IPC analysis - the largest number recorded in this catastrophic level of hunger since Somalia in 2011, when a quarter million Somalis lost their lives to hunger. In Tigray and surrounding areas, 74% of the population are expected to face crisis or worse levels acute hunger beginning this July.²⁷

In Yemen, nearly a decade of war has stripped people of their savings, leaving many with no resources to buy food. Blockades and conflict have caused spiralling food prices, with staple foods prices increasing by over 100% since 2016.²⁸ Over 16 million people in Yemen are expected to face crisis or worse levels of food insecurity this year.²⁹

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by conflict and hunger.³⁰ They typically face extraordinary dangers to secure food, and yet, too often eating last and eating least. Conflict and displacement have also forced women to abandon their jobs or miss planting seasons. They face impossible choices, like having to choose between traveling to the market and risking getting physically or sexually assaulted, or watching their families go hungry.

Many countries battered by conflict know all too well that “people are not just starving, they are being starved”.³¹ Warring parties have intentionally turned starvation into a weapon of war, in cases of depriving civilians of food and water,³² impeding humanitarian relief, bombing markets, setting crops ablaze, and killing livestock.

Despite the UN Security Council recognising the link between hunger and conflict in Resolution 2417, blocking humanitarian aid remains commonplace across the world’s conflict zones, where attacks on civilians, crops, livestock and water supplies continue, largely with impunity.

Hunger worsened in the Central African Republic

Housseina Tindombi, a farmer from Bangassou in the Central African Republic (CAR), was forced to flee her home in January 2021, due to attacks on her hometown. After a month living in a makeshift camp with her family, she returned to her neighbourhood but found both her home and fields looted. *“My pain was immense. We used to eat almost exclusively the vegetables I grow. Now I don’t know how I will feed my family.”*

Since the pandemic, more than half the population of the country – or 2.4 million people – have faced severe food and nutrition insecurity. This is over 30% increase on the previous year.³³

Most Central Africans rely on agriculture to feed their families. With violence escalating in the wake of presidential elections last December, almost 340,000 people were forced to flee their homes, including many farmers who had to abandon their land or miss the planting season.³⁴

The main road between Bangui and Cameroon – responsible for approximately 80% of the country’s imported goods – was also shut due to armed group attacks, leading to an unprecedented disruption of food supplies and humanitarian aid. Shortage of agricultural supplies also led to a sharp decline in harvested food and livestock, devastating farmers’ income.

As a result, the average price of the minimum food basket rose by 11%, with some areas witnessing a more than 40% increase.³⁵ Only 13% of the population can reach an adequately stocked market with affordable goods.³⁶

COVID-19 economic fallout

More than a year and a half after the Coronavirus pandemic was declared, the economic decline caused by lockdowns and closures of borders, businesses, and markets has worsened the situation for the most disadvantaged people and led to a spike in hunger. Global economic activity has declined by 3.5% and poverty increased by 16%.³⁷

Around the world, 33 million workers lost their jobs in 2020. The pandemic led to mass unemployment causing \$3.7 trillion in lost labour income – the equivalent to 4.4% of 2019 global GDP. Economic shocks fuelled primarily by the pandemic have pushed over 40 million people in 17 countries to hunger – up from nearly 24 million the previous year.³⁸ This is a near 70 percent increase over the previous year,³⁹ and does not account for the 3 billion people who could not afford a healthy diet even before the pandemic – a figure likely to increase this year.⁴⁰

Globally, food prices have increased by almost 40 percent since last year,⁴¹ the highest rise in over a decade.⁴² This has been driven by increased demand for biofuels, lockdowns and border closures that continue to disrupt food flows.⁴³ Food inflation is making food unaffordable for many people even when it is available. This is especially true for people in countries like Yemen or Haiti, which import most of their food and cannot offer subsidies, price control mechanisms or cash transfers to increase people's purchasing power.

Higher prices have not necessarily generated higher profits for food producers, especially small-scale farmers who could not afford to buy seeds and fertilizers or transport their produce to markets. Without adequate storage facilities or access to markets, farmers have been forced to sell at whatever price they could, even at a loss, or watch their crops rot. As a result, 88% of Nigerian farmers surveyed last August indicated they had lost half their income during the pandemic.⁴⁴ Agricultural day laborers also lost their income, since they were not able to get to the fields.⁴⁵

The pandemic has also laid bare the [greatest rise of inequality since records began](#). While small food producers lost their income, revenues of the top 10 food and beverage-producing companies increased by nearly \$10 billion from 2019 to 2020. The increase in these corporate revenues alone would have been more than enough to pay for the 2021 humanitarian food security appeal.⁴⁶

Syrian women bearing the brunt of hunger

Few countries were hit harder by hunger last year than Syria. Three in five Syrians – 12.4 million people - currently face acute hunger.⁴⁷ This is an 88% rise over the previous year and one of the highest in the world.⁴⁸ The COVID-19 economic fallout on top of the effects of 10 years of conflict led to a dramatic depreciation of the local currency and a 313% increase in the average food basket price in just 12 months.⁴⁹ Conflict has also hit Syria's vital agricultural infrastructure, devastating farmers' income and food production.

Syria's women and girls are bearing the brunt of this hunger crisis. The war has pushed more women to become the main breadwinners, many having to work for the first time with few skills to secure a decent job and fair pay. What little they make barely covers their families' expenses. According to an Oxfam study, women-headed households were among the hardest hit by hunger, reporting a significant decline in their food consumption, and having to skip meals.⁵⁰ To cope, some families have had to resort to early child marriage to sustain themselves.

“For almost three years, we were trapped in our town. We lost our crops and all our savings and had to sell our cattle to survive. How would you feel if all that you can offer to your children is a plate of boiled herbs? Sleeping on an empty stomach has become the norm,” says Leena, 32, a mother of three from Southern Syria.

Many like Leena have not been able to put food on table for their families. In Aleppo – Syria’s largest governorate - women have lost their jobs in the agricultural sector as farmers, forcing them to accept any offer to earn an income. Some women have also lost their jobs due to downsizing brought on by COVID-19.

To help curb hunger, Oxfam has supported over 120,000 people since the start of the pandemic, including helping farmers with seeds and tools, rehabilitating irrigation networks, and providing cash to the most vulnerable people so that they can meet their food and essential needs.

Moreover, the most marginalized people including women, informal workers, the urban poor, and those living in informal settlements were the hardest hit by the pandemic. The global employment loss for women was 5%, compared to 3.9% for men. This cost women around the world at least \$800 billion in lost income in 2020.⁵¹ An additional 47 million more women worldwide are expected to fall into extreme poverty in 2021.⁵²

One key lesson from the pandemic is that social protection programs for people in need – like cash or food assistance– are important tools to use in addressing hunger. However, globally more than four billion people, or over half the world’s population, lacked any social protection last year.⁵³

Vaccine inequality fuelling hunger

The unequal distribution and access to COVID-19 vaccines - largely due to pharmaceutical companies’ monopolies and inaction of rich countries – will slow any economic recovery and make the escape from hunger and poverty much more difficult for millions of people around the world. The International Chamber of Commerce estimated that vaccine inequality at today’s scale could cost the world around \$9.2 trillion in economic losses, with emerging hunger hotspots like India potentially losing as much \$786 billion, or over 27 percent of its GDP.⁵⁴

While rich countries such as the United States have seen hunger decline since vaccination roll out,⁵⁵ the pandemic continues to obliterate lives and livelihoods for millions of people in poor countries. Oxfam has calculated that at the current vaccination rate, low-income countries would be waiting 57 years to fully vaccinate their populations.⁵⁶ The virus threatens to cause a further 132 million people to be undernourished due to lost jobs, disrupted incomes and poor health.⁵⁷ People facing hunger and malnutrition are also more at risk of contracting diseases including COVID-19.⁵⁸

The World Health Organisation has estimated that 11 billion doses are needed to vaccinate the whole world to a level of 70%, the point at which transmission could be significantly affected. Unless rich countries stop holding vaccine recipes hostage, the virus will continue raging in countries without enough resources, put millions of lives at risk, and push millions more to the brink. The solution lies in all governments urgently agreeing to a temporary waiver of the intellectual property rules on Covid-19 health technologies, so that qualified manufacturers around the world can ramp up production.

Climate

Last year, the world saw a record \$50 billion worth of damages from extreme weather disasters exacerbated by climate change (including \$6 billion in Honduras alone),⁵⁹ which were the primary driver responsible for pushing nearly 16 million people in 15 countries to crisis levels of hunger.⁶⁰ Despite this, governments have delayed action to tackle the climate crisis to focus instead on the pandemic.

Our warming climate is increasing the frequency and intensity of weather-related disasters such as storms, floods, and droughts. The past seven years have been the warmest years on record, with 2020 one of the hottest.⁶¹ Yearly, climate disasters have more than tripled since 1980, with currently one extreme weather event recorded per week.⁶²

Agriculture and food production bore 63% of the impact of these climate crisis shocks,⁶³ and it is vulnerable countries and poor communities, who least contributed to climate change, that are most affected. For example, in parts of east India hit by Cyclone Amphan last year, farmers lost their crops and fisherfolk lost their boats, and thus their main sources of income.⁶⁴

Similarly, in East Africa more and stronger cyclones last year have contributed to unprecedented plagues of desert locusts, leading to a major disruption to food supply chains, and reducing the availability and affordability of food for millions of people in the Horn of Africa and Yemen.⁶⁵

The frequency and intensity of climate-fuelled disasters will erode the ability of people already living in poverty to withstand shocks. Each disaster is leading them in a downward spiral of deepening poverty and hunger.

Climate and COVID-19 fuelling hunger in the Central American Dry Corridor⁶⁶

Since the start of the pandemic, repeated droughts on top of the pandemic economic fallout have caused spiralling hunger in the Central American Dry Corridor - home to Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.⁶⁷ In 2021, nearly 8 million people faced acute hunger in those countries – a rise from 2.2 million people in 2018.⁶⁸ Within this population, 1.7 million people are in emergency levels of hunger.⁶⁹

The region also suffered a record-breaking Atlantic hurricane season – witnessing 30 storms in 2020 compared to only 18 in 2019.⁷⁰ For instance, the Amanda and Cristóbal storms, together with Eta and Iota hurricanes, devastated harvests, destroying over 200,000 hectares of staple foods and cash crops in the four countries, including more than 10,000 hectares of coffee farmland in Nicaragua and Honduras.⁷¹

Moreover, lockdowns restricted informal trade and agricultural activities, and devastated incomes in Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras,⁷² as an estimated 8.3 million jobs were lost across Central America in 2020 during the pandemic.⁷³

EXTREME HUNGER HOTSPOTS

Yemen

"It was catastrophic news for us when they told us that humanitarian assistance was cut. My husband is very old to work, and I am sick. We had no choice but to send our children to ask people for food or collect leftovers from restaurants. Even the food they managed to collect was not enough." **Bahjah, Yemeni mother of 8 children, displaced by war to Hajjah governorate.**

Yemen is the second largest global food crisis after the Democratic Republic of Congo. Since the pandemic, over 16,500 people have faced famine-like conditions⁷⁴, with that figure expected to almost triple to 47,000 in June 2021.⁷⁵

Conflict continued for a sixth year despite the pandemic, leaving 13.5 million people suffering from acute hunger at the end of 2020, with almost 3 million more people estimated to be added to that number by June 2021.⁷⁶ Almost 70 percent of the population – nearly 21 million people – urgently need humanitarian assistance.

Women and children are the most impacted. Malnutrition has hit a record high in Yemen, as over a million pregnant and lactating women, and 2.3 million children under 5 suffer acute malnutrition.⁷⁷ Of these children, 400,000 are at risk of dying from malnutrition,⁷⁸ and over 86% of them are anemic.⁷⁹

Despite a UN global call for a ceasefire, conflict has heightened.⁸⁰ One in every eight Yemenis – or more than 4 million people- were forced to flee their home, including 172,000 people displaced last year alone.⁸¹ As a result, 67% of displaced people are food insecure as the fighting decimated crops and livestock, and devastated half of the population's livelihoods.⁸²

Continued conflict and restrictions on fuel imports have led to a fuel crisis. Insufficient fuel to power generators delayed food and water distribution trucks in displacement camps and slowed health services.⁸³ Increased fuel prices raised food transporting costs causing a 26% surge in food prices since March 2020.⁸⁴ The price of staple foods like wheat and flour, for example, have soared by up to 40% compared to the same period last year, while rice prices soared by 167% since 2016.⁸⁵

Farmers have told Oxfam they can no longer afford to pay for fuel to pump water for their crops, while fishermen said they could not fuel their boats. *"Sometimes everything we catch goes to fuel. To save on fuel, we use paddles, but then we cannot go far out, to where the big fish are,"* said Zaid, 35, a fisherman in Al Thuhayta Hodeidah.

The climate crisis has compounded the problem as delayed and meagre rainfall challenged farmers already struggling with higher fuel and pesticides prices.⁸⁶ In 2020, floods also impacted 300,000 people, the majority of whom were displaced people already without income and shelter, while the desert locust caused \$222 million's worth of damage to crops.⁸⁷

Dwindling aid has curtailed humanitarian agencies' response, worsening the hunger crisis. Only half of the \$3.38 billion needed for the humanitarian response last year– or US\$ 1.9 billion - had been received. This year, less than half the UN humanitarian response appeal for Yemen was funded.⁸⁸ As a result, food assistance was cut for 5 million people in May 2021.⁸⁹

Since April 2020, Oxfam has supported nearly 150,000 people in 9 governorates with immediate cash, and livelihoods grants. Oxfam also provided women-headed households with skills trainings to help them make a living from small and medium enterprises.

Afghanistan

“I know many people here who say, ‘we prefer to die from the Coronavirus rather than poverty and not eating.’”- Afghan woman in Guzara, Herat

A year of COVID-19 witnessed a 17% rise in extreme hunger in Afghanistan. Today, the country remains the third most food insecure in the world, closely behind Yemen, with 13.2 million people – or 42 % of its total population – facing acute hunger. Two million more people have gone to bed hungry since last year.⁹⁰ The number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has soared sixfold in four years.⁹¹

There is no better example of a country hit by the three lethal C's- COVID-19, conflict, and the climate crisis – than Afghanistan. The second wave of the virus, compounded by a surge in violence due to the US troop withdrawal, resulted in major loss of business, informal employment, massive displacements, and a sharp drop in remittances.

Against this backdrop, La Niña-fuelled drought has worsened during the Winter and Spring seasons, decimating farmers' crops and making food more scarce compared to average years.⁹²

The three lethal C's have pushed food prices to rise, with staple food prices seeing an average of 20% increase.⁹³ As a result, people's purchasing power has declined by nearly 20%, particularly as casual labourers and pastoralists lost their daily income during the pandemic. Decreased remittances have also driven people into crippling debt. Data from the 2020 Whole of Afghanistan Assessment showed that the primary reason for taking on this debt last year was to pay for food (53 percent).⁹⁴

To curb the rise in hunger, Afghanistan's government launched a food project -*Dastarkhwan-e-Meli* - but the distributed meagre package (of 50kg flour, 5kg oil, 5kg beans) barely meets half of a family's basic needs.

For a country heavily reliant on international aid, dwindling funds – only 24 percent of the total \$123.5 million required humanitarian funds has been met - will curtail these government initiatives.⁹⁵

Since March 2020, Oxfam has supported nearly 100,000 of the most vulnerable people in Herat, Diakundi, and Nangahar provinces with cash to buy essentials and food. To prevent the spread of COVID-19, Oxfam has also provided hygiene kits and hand washing facilities and delivered health awareness campaigns.

South Sudan

“Our house was flooded, and our goats were stolen, as we had to flee to Pibor. We left [Verteth] with nothing except the clothes on our bodies.” - Ngachibaba, echoing the story of hundreds of families.

In the world's youngest country, the current hunger situation in South Sudan is at its highest levels since independence was declared in 2011.⁹⁶ The country is among the worst food crises in the world, with 82% of the population living in extreme poverty, and 60% - or 7.2 million

people – currently facing crisis levels of hunger.⁹⁷ In three states, 108,000 people are currently suffering famine-like conditions.⁹⁸

Children and women are most impacted by the food crisis, as over 15% of children under five are stunted, and over one third of women of reproductive age are anaemic.⁹⁹

Less than 20% of the \$1.68 billion UN Humanitarian appeal for South Sudan has been funded, the situation is likely to worsen for millions.¹⁰⁰

Although the peace agreement is holding, pockets of organized conflicts and intercommunal violence have continued. Escalated violence between armed groups has forced nearly 2.3 million South Sudanese to flee to neighbouring countries and displaced nearly 1.9 million others,¹⁰¹ the majority of whom women are children.¹⁰² Livelihoods, including agriculture and other economic activities which are the source of food and income for communities, are disrupted where conflict erupts.

COVID-19 disrupted the flow of goods as imposed lockdowns led to unemployment, especially for informal workers, the majority of whom are women. Without income, many poor households had to cut all their other costs to pay for food. In addition, unusual flooding during 2020 affected an estimated 856,000 people,¹⁰³ causing displacement and loss of crops. Continued above-normal rainfall will jeopardize future agricultural activities.

Oxfam is responding to the hunger crisis in South Sudan with lifesaving assistance, aiming to reach 102,000 people in the hunger hotspots of Akobo and Pibor with multisector assistance for water, sanitation, hygiene, food security, protection, and gender justice.

West African Sahel

The West African Sahel region – Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Senegal - is seeing a staggering 67% surge in hunger,¹⁰⁴ continuing to be one of the fastest growing hunger crises in the world.¹⁰⁵ Countries most torn by conflict, such as Burkina Faso and Northern Nigeria, are the hardest hit, with Burkina Faso's hunger levels alone rose by 213% since last year.

Since [Oxfam's last Hunger Virus report](#) in July 2020, the number of people facing crisis levels of hunger have passed the 15 million mark,¹⁰⁶ which is expected to rise to over 22 million people during the upcoming lean season. Women and children are especially impacted, including 1.6 million children in the region who are currently severely malnourished.¹⁰⁷

Armed conflict continued to surge and remained the primary driver of displacement and hunger in the region. Escalated violence, especially around Central Sahel and Lake Chad basin¹⁰⁸, has forced 5.3 million people to flee their homes and lose everything.¹⁰⁹ Many who flee are hosted in communities already struggling to feed themselves. Insecurity has also cut off farmers and herders from their land.

Despite the need to allocate resources to address the hunger crisis, budgets went to military spending. Arms imports by Burkina Faso and Mali spiralled by 83% and 669% respectively between 2016-2020, compared to 2011-2015.¹¹⁰

The climate crisis further worsens the situation, as unpredictable weather extremes became more frequent and more severe. The number of floods increased by 180% since 2015, destroying the homes, crops, and livestock of 1.7 million people last year alone.¹¹¹

The climate crisis, compounded by conflict and the fallout from the pandemic, has driven food prices to a 10% five-year high in West Africa, worsening people's living conditions.¹¹²

Oxfam has helped more than 700,000 vulnerable people in the region since the pandemic started. Together with partners, Oxfam has helped over 60,000 people in Chad meet their immediate food needs as well as secure income; and helped over 280,000 people in Niger and Senegal cope with the economic impact of COVID-19, including providing food, cash assistance, clean water, sanitation, and hygiene kits.

Venezuela

"I am concerned about the restrictions on supporting initiatives taken by civil society organizations to respond to food insecurity." Director of UNIANDES, Oxfam partner

Even prior to the pandemic, the complex humanitarian emergency in Venezuela had taken its toll on nearly all people, as an estimated 94% of Venezuelans could not afford to have sufficient food.¹¹³ In 2019, 9.3 million Venezuelans – nearly a third of the population – were facing moderate to severe levels of hunger in what was the world's fourth largest food crisis.¹¹⁴

Oxfam local partner, *Codhez*, conducted a survey in the states of Lara, Zulia and Tachira, which revealed that 50% to 80% of residents resorted to extreme negative coping mechanisms to overcome food scarcity, such as skipping meals, decreasing portions and dietary diversity, sending children away to borrow and beg, or selling permanent assets to cover food costs.¹¹⁵

School closures have deepened hunger, as schools provided the main source for children's meals. Other closures and restrictions affected agricultural planting that resulted in smaller yields and reduced access to markets.

The food crisis was worsened by harsh economic conditions and galloping inflation. Many Venezuelans were unable to purchase enough food to feed their families due to a combination of hyperinflation and devaluation of local currency. By April 2021, the monthly minimum wage was only enough to buy less than 1% of the basic food basket for a family of five people.¹¹⁶ To feed their family, an individual would need to have earned 547 times the minimum wage.¹¹⁷ In May 2021, the Venezuelan government announced a minimum wage increase of nearly 300% which is still not enough to cover the cost of one kilo of meat.¹¹⁸

Oxfam is working with local organisations to provide food assistance to 4,000 vulnerable people, including supporting local NGOs that are operating community kitchens providing prepared meals to highly vulnerable families.

EMERGING HUNGER HOTSPOTS

Brazil

"My daughter was born extremely premature and since then my financial life was in shambles, as we were without a job. As soon as she was discharged from the hospital, she was prescribed a very expensive formula." - **25-year-old woman from Federal District, Brazil**

People in Brazil have not been spared from the surge in hunger around the world. Since the pandemic, the country's COVID-19 deaths ranked the third highest in the world, while the

percent of Brazilians living in extreme poverty almost tripled - from 4.5% to 12.8%.¹¹⁹ By the end of 2020, over half the population - 116 million people - were struggling with some level of food insecurity, of which nearly 20 million people faced hunger.¹²⁰ This represents an upward trend from previous years.

Hunger did not impact everyone equally. Disadvantaged groups including black people, women, people living in rural areas and indigenous people, were hit hardest by hunger last year. By the end of 2020, 11% of women-headed households were living in hunger, while more than 10% of Black households faced hunger compared to over 7% of white households. Moreover, 12% of rural households faced hunger, compared to over 8% of urban households.¹²¹

The Brazilian middle-class family has also been affected, as the percent of people living in some level of food insecurity has almost doubled from over 20% in 2018 to almost 35% by the end of 2020.

The pandemic has resulted in a social and economic breakdown, deepening the hunger crisis. Measures to curb the spread of the virus forced businesses to close, leaving over half the working age Brazilians unemployed and almost 15 million people without a job by the end of the first quarter of 2021.¹²² Small and medium sized companies crashed, representing 40% of all businesses that closed through July 2020.¹²³

To help people cope, the Government supplied emergency aid including cash transfers to 68 million Brazilians only in the second half of 2020, but this support was interrupted, leaving millions of people without a minimum income to survive. Less than half that number will be able to receive support in the new emergency aid that was approved in April this year. As a result, more people will be pushed into extreme poverty and hunger.

In 2020, Oxfam Brasil responded to the hunger crisis providing young people and their families in Recife, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia with food vouchers. Since March 2021, in partnership with the Black Coalition for Rights, Oxfam Brasil is engaged in the “There Are Hungry People” campaign, to reach 223,000 families in the country.

India

“As COVID-19 gripped our surroundings in March this year, I was rendered jobless and penniless overnight. Lockdown and related restrictions forced me to discontinue my sewing work or taking up casual labour jobs, bringing our household income to zero.” - Mohammed Ilyas.

In India, millions of people are experiencing a severe lack of food. In 2020, nearly 190 million people were under-nourished and over one third of children under the age of five were stunted.¹²⁴ People’s consumption of essential food staples like lentils fell by 64%, while their consumption of green vegetables plummeted by 73% in 2020.¹²⁵ Over 70% of people reported having to reduce their overall quantity of food intake compared to their pre-pandemic eating levels.¹²⁶

Reduced income, poor implementation of social protection programmes, and school closures have fuelled hunger in India. A survey of 47,000 households across 15 states found that the average family lost more than 60% of its income since the pandemic due to massive job losses, especially in the informal sector.¹²⁷ Nearly 8 million jobs were cut in the month of April 2021 alone.¹²⁸

Additionally, the social protection system is failing those most in need. The government relies on outdated 2011 Census data for calculating beneficiaries of its Public Distribution Scheme. As a result, 100 million people entitled to receiving food rations were excluded from receiving much-needed assistance.¹²⁹ It is estimated that only 57% of the population entitled to this assistance is covered.¹³⁰

School closures were another key driver of hunger as nearly 120 million children across the country who relied on schools' mid-day meals could no longer receive food. With all schools shut and many of the meal programs halted, children were left without an important source of nutritious food.¹³¹

In 2020, Oxfam India supported 423,800 people in 92 districts across 16 states with dry ration kits and cooked meal packets. With the country experiencing a second wave of the pandemic, Oxfam extended food distribution to Delhi and Maharashtra, in addition to campaigning to ensure that India's poor and marginalized communities have access to government relief packages and other benefits.

South Africa

"With the unemployment that is skyrocketing in Makhanda and the effects of COVID-19, people are not able to have informal jobs...Hunger is real in this town," - Zameka Chibi.

Despite being once ranked among food-secure nations,¹³² South Africa is increasingly going hungry. By the end of 2020, more than 24 million people were living in stressed or higher levels of food insecurity,¹³³ compared to 13.7 million people who did not have access to enough food prior to the pandemic.¹³⁴

During the country's first lockdown, between May and August 2020, up to 23% of the population were hungry.¹³⁵ By the third quarter of 2020, 14% of the South African population had reached crisis levels of hunger including 2% at emergency levels of hunger.¹³⁶

As the pandemic and lockdown measures caused job and income losses to spiral, millions of people in South Africa could not afford to buy food. By the end of 2020 nearly half of South African households went hungry because they could not afford food.¹³⁷

Children were most impacted by the pandemic's food crisis, as many were already vulnerable to the lack of adequate food. Prior to the pandemic, one in four South African children under the age of five was stunted due to malnutrition.¹³⁸ It is estimated that as many as 400,000 children in this age group did not have access to food as a result of the pandemic.¹³⁹ The closure of schools also meant an end to a national feeding program for 9 million children.¹⁴⁰

The climate crisis also impacted food availability, as drought in some parts of KwaZulu Natal and Eastern Cape provinces continued to undermine food and livestock production.¹⁴¹

Oxfam South Africa and local partners have responded to COVID-19 related hunger by introducing soup kitchens in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape, mobilizing food supplies for people who are homeless in the inner city of Johannesburg and are expanding food supply distribution to the Western Cape.

ACTION NEEDED

There is no end to hunger unless drastic collective measures are taken to end the underlying injustices fuelling hunger. As governments rebuild after the Coronavirus pandemic, seven urgent actions are required to stop the growing hunger crisis and build more just and sustainable food systems that work for all people:

- 1. Provide emergency assistance to save lives now:** Donor governments must fully fund the UN's global food security appeal and ensure it directly reaches those most affected. Governments must also scale up social protection, including financing a global social protection fund,¹⁴² and support small-scale farmers and pastoralists to restock and prepare for the next planting season.
- 2. Guarantee humanitarian assistance reaches people:** Conflict parties must facilitate immediate humanitarian access to help save civilians from starvation. Where aid is blocked, the international community must act to stop hunger being used as a weapon of war and hold perpetrators accountable.
- 3. Forge inclusive and sustainable peace:** Warring parties must forge inclusive and sustainable peace that puts human security first and addresses urgent hunger in conflict-affected countries. Leaders should live up to their commitments to include marginalized groups including youth, women, and minorities in peace processes. Ceasefires have been shown to last longer and be more effective where women are actively involved in the negotiations.¹⁴³
- 4. Build fairer, more resilient, and sustainable food systems:** Governments must commit to bolder actions at the upcoming UN Committee on World Food Security meeting in October in order to put fair, gender-just, resilient, and sustainable food systems at the heart of the post-pandemic recovery. Governments and the private sector must also scale-up investments in small-scale and agro-ecological food production, ensure producers earn a fair income by establishing minimum producer prices and other support mechanisms, and ensure workers earn a living wage.
- 5. Promote women's leadership in COVID-19 solutions:** Women must have the opportunity to lead on decisions related to the pandemic response and recovery, including how to address our broken food system. Action is also needed to address discrimination faced by women food producers on issues such as access to land, markets, information, credit, extension services and technology.
- 6. Support a People's Vaccine:** To help prevent new virus variants from threatening the health of the world and its economy, G7 governments must end pharmaceutical COVID-19 vaccines monopolies to help developing countries vaccinate their populations and prevent millions more from falling into extreme poverty.
- 7. Take urgent action to tackle the climate crisis:** Ahead of this year's Climate Summit in December, rich polluting nations must dramatically cut emissions, keep global temperatures from rising above 1.5 degrees and help smallholder food producers adapt to climate change.¹⁴⁴

NOTES

¹ According to Johns Hopkins University's Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE), the average daily number of confirmed COVID-19 deaths during the week from June 14, 2021 to June 20, 2021 was 9,967. This is equivalent to 7 deaths per minute. Source: [COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering \(CSSE\)](#) (last accessed June 14, 2021).

² The [Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(IPC\)](#) is an initiative to improve food security and nutrition analysis and decision-making. Food security agencies including governments use the IPC classification and analytical approach to measure the severity and magnitude of acute and chronic food insecurity and acute malnutrition in a country, providing decision-makers with a rigorous, evidence- and consensus-based analysis to inform funding, programming, and policy. Oxfam is a global partner of IPC. There are five phases in the IPC Acute Food Insecurity Scale: None/Minimal (IPC Phase 1), Stressed (IPC Phase 2), Crisis (IPC Phase 3), Emergency (IPC Phase 4), and Catastrophe/Famine (IPC Phase 5).

³ As of 14 June 2021, the number of people at Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) was 521,814. At the end of 2019 when the pandemic broke, this figure was 84,500 – an increase in catastrophic hunger of 517.5%. Sources: [the Global Report on Food Crises \(GRFC\) 2021](#) and the most recent IPC analyses for [Ethiopia](#) (Tigray and zones in Afar and Amhara), [Madagascar](#) (Grand Sud), [South Sudan](#), and [Yemen](#). For more information on the IPC phase classification Catastrophe (IPC Phase 5) go to <http://www.ipcinfo.org/famine-facts/>.

⁴ Oxfam has applied the [IPC crude death rate cut offs for IPC 3 phase](#) to the [Global Report on Food Crises \(GRFC\) 2021](#) global figure of 155 million people in IPC3+ to calculate the number of people who could die from hunger every minute. This will equal 7,750-15,345 per day (5-11 per minute).

⁵ See note 1.

⁶ [GRFC 2021](#), p.22.

⁷ The UN has called for [a global ceasefire](#) to help respond to the pandemic in March 2020. Records on ceasefire show little progress since. Source: [The Peace Agreement Database](#)

⁸ The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (April 2021) "[Trends in Military Spending 2020](#)

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¹¹ The World Bank (2021). [World Bank, Global Economic Prospects, June 2021. Washington, DC: The World Bank, outlook 2021](#) and <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty> (last accessed 12 June, 2021)

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¹⁴ According to the EM-DAT [International Disasters Database](#), the year 2020 witnessed 398 weather fueled disasters. (Last accessed 22 June 2021)

¹⁵ <https://www.noaa.gov/media-release/record-breaking-atlantic-hurricane-season-draws-to-end>

¹⁶ GRFC 2021 p. 29-32

¹⁷ http://www.ipcinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/ipcinfo/docs/ch/CH_Regional_Acute_Food_and_Nutrition_Insecurity_2020MarAug.pdf

¹⁸ The West African Sahel countries IPC3+ figures for Jun-Aug 2019 compared to the same period 2020 were : Niger: 1.2m / 2m ; Mali: 554K / 1.3m ; Burkina Faso: 687K/2.1m ; Chad: 641K/1m; Nigeria 4.9m / 7m ; Mauritania: 607K/609K; Senegal: 341K/767K respectively. Source: Cardre Harmonise'.

¹⁹ Millions more people in Venezuela are facing a worsening food crisis but no recent reliable data are available.

²⁰ This figure does not include Venezuela.

²¹ In April 2021 Oxfam and 400 NGOs [called upon world leaders to cut military spending by one day](#) to cover the \$5.5bn the UN WFP and FAO say is urgently needed to help those experiencing the most severe levels of food insecurity. Since then military spending rose by \$50bn.

²² 20 out of the 25 countries mentioned in this report were impacted by the collective three drivers of hunger, covid, conflict and climate.

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²⁷ The Global [Report On Food Crises 2021](#), p17

²⁸ [Ethiopia IPC data](#) May-Sept2021- Published in 2021

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- ³¹ Gabriela Bucher, “[Conflict & Food Security](#)” - UN Security Council Open Debate 11 March 2021
- ³² Article 8(2)(e)(xix) of the Rome Statute, mirroring Article 8(2)(b)(xxv)
- ³³ Figures are based on 2019 compared to 2020 data. Source: [GRFC 2021](#) p29.
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- ³⁵ [REACH database](#). In Kaga-Bandoro, for instance, prices rose by 42% between November 2020 and April 2021. Kaga-Bandoro has been an epicentre of the recent violence.
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- ³⁸ GRFC 2021, p22
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- ⁴⁰ FAO, [The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World \(SOFI\) 2020](#).
- ⁴¹ The FAO Food Price Index (FFPI) averaged 127.1 points in May 2021, 5.8 points (4.8 percent) higher than in April and as much as 36.1 points (39.7 percent) above the same period last year.
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- ⁶² <https://www.climateaction.org/news/a-climate-crisis-disaster-happening-every-week-says-un>
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- ⁶⁵ <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/35058/FB022.pdf?sequence=3>
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