

Breaking the cycle:

tackling the root causes of food crises



Photo: Alexia Webster/Panos Pictures for Concern Worldwide/Malawi/2015

Above: Terezinha Zhuwao, 74, prepares an evening meal for herself and her family in a temporary camp for flood affected families at Khulubvi school, Nsanje, Malawi.

Despite the development gains of the last few decades and a planet capable of feeding us all, hunger and malnutrition remain the number one risk to health globally¹. At the start of 2017, 795 million people go to bed hungry every night². Children are among those worst affected, with more than three million dying every year from undernutrition and hundreds of millions suffering from long-term damage to their health and development³.

Significant progress has been made in reducing hunger levels around the world over the last 20 years, but the situation at the start of 2017 remains one of severe need with 50 countries facing 'serious' and 'alarming' levels of hunger⁴. Already this year, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation has appealed for over \$1 billion to reach over 40 million people in urgent need of food assistance across 39 countries⁵.

The map overleaf indicates some of the world's major hunger hotspots this year. Among them, conflict in north-eastern Nigeria has led to major displacement and a catastrophic food crisis with 5.1 million people severely food insecure⁶. In Yemen, an escalation of the conflict has compounded pre-existing hunger and poverty to leave over half the population in urgent need of food⁷. In South Sudan, protracted conflict, exacerbated by harsh and unpredictable weather, has placed 4.9 million people in a situation of severe food insecurity⁸. Meanwhile, southern Africa continues to suffer from the impacts of drought caused by the El Niño

climate system, with 6.7 million people food insecure in Malawi alone⁹.

This scale of need poses a major challenge to the international community – one which it is failing to meet. There are insufficient funds available to provide assistance to all those in need. And where assistance does come, it is often too slow. Preventable problems have been allowed to escalate into full-scale crises, increasing the levels of hunger, malnutrition and suffering. And as each crisis escalates, so too does the cost of responding adequately to it, placing much greater financial demands on donors than if action had been taken earlier.

Efforts to tackle hunger in the long-term are also at risk of stalling: in 2015, 193 governments signed up to the Sustainable Development Goals to end poverty and hunger for all people worldwide by 2030. Yet we are already off track to meet these commitments in areas such as hunger and nutrition¹⁰.

What is needed at the start of 2017 is a step change to deal with the ongoing catastrophe of hunger. The international community must:

- scale up investment in nutrition interventions in order to tackle the immediate and underlying causes of undernutrition
- build communities' resilience to help them withstand periodic food crises, conflict and climate change
- deliver rapid and flexible humanitarian assistance targeted at those who need it most

The challenge of hunger

The underlying causes of hunger are complex, but two of the most significant factors are conflict and climate disasters. These are pushing people into long periods of food insecurity, testing their ability to cope and causing prolonged suffering and death.

Many of the regions currently worst affected by hunger are in the grip of seemingly intractable conflicts. These force people from their homes, damage livelihoods, cause farmland to go uncultivated and food prices to rise far beyond the reach of many people.

Periods of severe or unpredictable weather can lead to flooding or drought, wrecking harvests or substantially reducing the amount of animal pasture available. The ongoing suffering caused by the El Niño climate system, particularly in southern Africa, illustrates the toll climate disasters are already taking on vulnerable people. And climate change will make the situation worse, increasing the frequency and severity of these disasters.

In many of the worst affected parts of the world, food crises are not experienced as isolated events but as repeated cycles. Over the past ten years, the Sahel region and the Horn of Africa have been repeatedly affected by food shortages and widespread malnutrition. This has had a cumulative impact – as each disaster

hits, people resort to damaging short-term measures to withstand a crisis, weakening their longer-term resilience and leaving them more vulnerable to the next. They are forced to take their children out of school, sell their livestock or tools, or buy only staple foods like wheat rather than fresh fruit and vegetables. This compromises their future chances of working their way out of poverty and can damage the nutritional health of their children.


Many slow-onset crises are predictable. Weather forecasts and market data often provide warning of a developing food crisis, creating a crucial window of opportunity to act and lessen its impact on the most vulnerable. But, too often the response of governments and donors is slow and inadequate, and the opportunity is wasted.

Of course, donors face competing priorities, and media attention tends to focus on crises with global political implications or sudden, dramatic disasters. This means there is a lack of interest or pressure on donors to help those affected by slow-onset disasters which too often become 'forgotten emergencies'. Typically, appeals for humanitarian funds go underfunded by a significant margin. In 2016, only 57 per cent of the money required by the UN to meet humanitarian needs around the world was delivered by donors¹¹.

Below: Akuch Monica Mawien, a supervisor with the Concern community nutrition team in South Sudan, carries out a measurement of a child's mid upper arm circumference to check their nutritional status.





Hunger Hotspots 2017

NIGERIA 


Conflict in north-eastern regions and population displacement.

- Severely food insecure: 5.1 million
- Funding: Requested \$484.2 million Received \$254.2 million Percentage fulfilled 52.5%
- Concern is not currently operating in Nigeria but is responding to wider displacement through cash for work, and education in Niger.

SUDAN  


Conflict and civil insecurity.

- Food insecure: 3.6 million
- Funding: Requested \$971.8 million Received \$557.5 million Percentage fulfilled 57.4%
- Concern is providing health, water and sanitation, and humanitarian assistance.

SOUTH SUDAN  



Conflict and civil insecurity coupled with economic downturn.

- Severely food insecure: 4.9 million
- Funding: Requested \$1,300 million Received \$1,100 million Percentage fulfilled 84.6%
- Concern is providing water and sanitation support, food distribution, scaling up health, and nutrition programming.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO 


Conflict and civilian displacement coupled with increasing refugee population.

- Food insecure: 6 million
- Funding: Requested \$690 million Received \$412.3 million Percentage fulfilled 59.7%
- Concern is providing humanitarian assistance, water and sanitation, and building livelihoods.

BURUNDI  


Civil insecurity and severe flooding.

- Food insecure: 2.1 million food insecure
- Funding: Requested \$62.3 million Received \$53.6 million Percentage fulfilled 86%
- Concern is providing nutrition, health, shelter and livelihood support.

MALAWI 



Severe droughts exacerbated by El Niño leading to significant decline in cereal production.

- Food insecure: 6.7 million
- Funding: Requested \$395.2 million Received \$111.8 million Percentage fulfilled 28.3%
- Concern is providing cash transfers and access to nutrition services.

ETHIOPIA 


Worst drought in decades caused largely by El Niño has devastated local livelihoods.

- Food insecure: 5.6 million
- Funding: Requested \$1,620 million Received \$1,060 million Percentage fulfilled 65.4%
- Concern is providing child malnutrition treatment, seed and clean water distribution.

SOMALIA  


Drought conditions and crop failures and civil insecurity.

- Acutely food insecure: 5 million
- Funding: Requested \$885.2 million Received \$471.4 million Percentage fulfilled 53.3%
- Concern is providing cash transfers, water and flood relief.

YEMEN 

Civil conflict coupled with extreme poverty.

- Severely food insecure: 14.4 million
- Funding: Requested \$1,600 million Received \$984 million Percentage fulfilled 61.5%
- Concern is supporting partner ACTED to deliver food, shelter, water and sanitation.

SYRIA 



Continuing civil conflict.

- Food insecure: 2.9 million
- Funding: Requested \$3,200 million Received \$1,500 million Percentage fulfilled 46.9%
- Concern is supporting water and sanitation, providing shelter and increasing food security.

AFGHANISTAN 

Continuing conflict causing mass displacement.

- Food insecure: 12 million
- Funding: Requested \$338.8 million Received \$200.5 million Percentage fulfilled 59.2%
- Concern is providing livelihoods, water and increasing food security.

CHAD  

Civil insecurity and mass displacement.

- Food insecure: 4.4 million
- Funding: Requested \$541.3 million Received \$274.7 million Percentage fulfilled 50.7%
- Concern is providing cash transfers and child malnutrition treatment.

Key

-  Over 2 million food insecure
-  50,000 - 2 million food insecure
-  Conflict
-  Climate change

Funding statistics are based on UN appeals for the year 2016, taken from: United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, Financial Tracking Service. All other statistics taken from: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, FAO in the 2017 humanitarian appeals, 2016

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Solutions

The complexity of the factors that lead to food crises, and the challenges involved in addressing them, mean that there is no single straight forward solution. Nevertheless, Concern's experience of working with vulnerable communities across the world has helped us identify priority areas which would reduce the devastation caused by food crises, now and in the future.

Addressing the immediate and underlying causes of undernutrition

Providing immediate nutrition support throughout pregnancy up to the age of five can help protect children for their entire lives, reducing the likelihood of disease, poor health and mental retardation. In 2012, the international community committed to six World Health Assembly nutrition targets. A set of high impact interventions have been identified, which if scaled up immediately could save around 2.2 million lives and result in 50 million fewer children stunted in 2025¹². While this will cost affected governments an additional \$1.4 billion per year and donors an additional \$650 million per year until 2025¹³, there is a strong economic argument for preventing undernutrition – it delivers \$16 in returns on investment for every \$1 spent¹⁴.

Action is also needed to tackle the underlying causes of malnutrition by encouraging families to grow and eat more nutritious crops, improving the quality of care for infants and children, and increasing access to health services and basic sanitation. One straightforward but effective action would be to integrate nutrition into the design and delivery of development programmes across sectors such as health, agriculture, social protection and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

Building the resilience of vulnerable people

Because of the cyclical nature of food crises in many parts of the world and the increasing challenges posed by climate change, it is crucial to tackle hunger in a way that builds the resilience of vulnerable people for the future. This means both addressing the root causes of food crises and the short-term needs of disaster-affected people. It means helping people to build the skills and resources they need so that when disasters occur they do not have to resort to short-term coping strategies which leave them worse off after each disaster. It means targeting the poorest and most vulnerable, recognising how underlying issues

such as gender inequality, insufficient education or lack of political voice can combine with factors such as conflict or climatic changes to put them at greater risk. And it means working in collaboration with affected people and drawing on their understanding to help them adapt to the increasingly difficult conditions.

As with undernutrition, the argument for resilience building is an economic as well as a moral one. Supporting vulnerable people to tackle the range of threats they face – ensuring they have ongoing access to food at times of conflict and displacement, education and health facilities to avoid ill health, information to prepare for fluctuating weather conditions – represents a much more cost-effective use of aid budgets than repeatedly responding to food crises that could be prevented. It is therefore crucial to scale-up funding to support the resilience building of people vulnerable to food crises.

Quick and effective humanitarian response

When communities and national governments are overwhelmed by a food crisis, it is imperative that the international humanitarian response is swift, efficient and sufficient. No one should go hungry or die because of lack of money or bureaucratic impediments. An effective humanitarian response requires translating early warnings into early action – as acting early is cheaper, more efficient and saves lives. The UN and humanitarian agencies are developing 'Standard Operating Procedures' containing agreed thresholds to trigger a concerted international response – these could improve crisis responses globally if adopted by all. Funding for humanitarian response should be based on need alone, reaching all those who need support wherever they are and regardless of donors' political priorities. The current funding system should also be overhauled to take better account of the cyclical or protracted nature of many crises.

It is important to recognise that the drivers of hunger, like conflict and climate change, cannot be solved by humanitarian and development agencies. Humanitarian agencies can save lives but cannot end wars. There must be more commitment from governments globally to tackle conflicts at a political level at the outset. Humanitarian aid can no longer be used as a substitute for failed diplomacy or the lack of political will to find solutions to protracted conflicts.

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Recommendations

Ending hunger for good requires commitment, concerted action and political will. The suite of recently agreed global policy frameworks agreed in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction provide us with an unprecedented opportunity to achieve many of the changes that are needed. Governments must fulfil their commitments to these. Donors should also commit to spending 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income on Overseas Development Assistance to ensure that the battle against hunger is sufficiently well resourced. In addition, donors and governments should take action related to the three key areas discussed in this paper:

Address the immediate and underlying causes of undernutrition

1. Scale up global investments to deliver the most cost-effective nutrition interventions by an additional \$2 billion per year, for the next 10 years.
2. Commit to tackling the underlying causes of malnutrition by integrating nutrition into the design and delivery of agriculture, health, WASH and social protection programmes.

Build resilience of the vulnerable

1. Increase investment in the form of predictable, multi-year funding to integrated resilience-building programmes which address current needs and tackle the root causes of food crises.
2. Prioritise support for resilience programmes which address inequality and fully involve vulnerable people in planning and implementation.

Provide rapid humanitarian assistance to those who need it most

1. Provide rapid humanitarian funding to all emergencies based purely on need, eliminating funding gaps.
2. Deliver faster, more effective and more accountable humanitarian responses.

1. World Food Programme, *Hunger*, 2017
2. Ibid.
3. Global Nutrition Report, *From Promise to Impact: ending malnutrition by 2030*, 2016
4. International Food Policy Research Institute, *Global Hunger Index*, 2016
5. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *FAO in the 2017 humanitarian appeals*, 2016
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Crop Prospects and Food Situation*, 2016
10. Global Nutrition Report, 2016
11. United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *Financial Tracking Service*, 2016
12. This priority package of interventions includes: vitamin A supplement for children, treatment of acute malnutrition and pro-breastfeeding social policies. Source: 1,000 Days, *Investing in Nutrition the foundation for development*, 2016
13. Ibid.
14. Global Nutrition Report, 2016