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# Humanitarian Situation and Risks in Central American Dry Corridor

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## Situation Overview

**El Niño is the climate pattern** associated with the change in surface sea temperature in the Pacific Ocean which, among other effects, can cause drought in northern South America, Central America and the Caribbean. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Climatic Prediction Center (June 2023), a transition from ENSO-neutral to El Niño is expected in the coming months, with a >90% chance of El Niño persisting into the Northern Hemisphere winter of 2023-24. The historical analysis of El Niño events confirms the generation of dry conditions **with higher risk of protracted drought**, and subsequent food and nutrition crisis.

After a protracted three-year absence, the climatic subregion referred to as the **Dry Corridor** (*Corredor Seco*) - shared by **Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua**, is expected to suffer a reduction of precipitation which may produce droughts similar to those of 2014, 2015, and 2018 that severely disrupted agricultural practices, undermined food production and increased levels of food insecurity and malnutrition for children and families living in the area, in a context of already decreased access to food and safe water. Competing uses of water for agriculture, and for household use and human consumption become more stressed, exacerbating water related diseases due to diminished water availability for healthy hygiene practices, and due to increased contamination of water sources, affecting children under 5 years old the hardest. The regions most affected are those where food supply is mostly dependant on importation or the agriculture sector employs a significant portion of the population, the constrained agricultural productivity would reduce the ability to access to foods, amid domestic markets highly sensitive to exchange rates worsening (e.g., against US\$), persistent depreciation of the national currencies and monetary instability.

Climatic perspectives for the period May-July 2023<sup>i</sup> estimated the probability that **rainfall will be below normal range** over most of the coastal and southern regions of El Salvador, and southern and central-northern Honduras, while normal precipitations are still expected over Southern Guatemala and Nicaragua. According to the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) analysis,<sup>ii</sup> in **Central America, most poor, rural households suffer the highest impacts** of above-average prices for food, transportation, and other living expenses, and below-average income. Such patterns of extremely scarce rainfalls are of great concern for the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources in El Salvador, as well as for the Permanent Commission of Contingencies (COPECO) in Honduras, which declared an indefinite Red Alert for 140 municipalities, due to meteorological [drought](#).

Against this background, current UNICEF preparedness plans for Northern of Central America and Nicaragua foresee multi-sectoral preparedness actions for approximately 410,000 people at risk, including 167,000 children.



**2.3 million**  
People in Acute Food Insecurity Situation in Honduras (IPC3+)



**1.7 million**  
People in the Dry Corridor at-risk of facing humanitarian needs due to drought  
(estimated by UNICEF)



**410,000**  
People to be reached under UNICEF preparedness plans  
(estimated by UNICEF)



**167,000**  
Children to be reached under UNICEF preparedness plans  
(estimated by UNICEF)

# Summary of Anticipated Sectoral Needs

## Health and Nutrition

In areas where food prices are particularly sensitive to the worsening of domestic and international market dynamics, significant portions of the population would suffer from reduced ability to access food, particularly animal-sourced foods high in caloric energy, protein, and fat. Overall **nutritional intake decreases**, and poor households are at higher risk to suffer **multiple micronutrient deficits**, contributing to higher prevalence of underweight and stunting among children under five.

Affected countries have begun assessments and signalled a need for immediacy amidst a deteriorating situation. An indefinite **nationwide alert in Honduras** issued by COPECO (Secretary of State in the Office of Risk Management and National Contingencies) has been elevated in 85 municipalities facing potential drought. According to the Humanitarian Response Plan for **El Salvador**,<sup>iii</sup> an estimated 219,000 children, pregnant and breastfeeding women are in need of nutritional humanitarian assistance. In a context where multi-dimensional poverty affects 58.5% of rural households, children with moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) are at risk of severe acute malnutrition (SAM) if not screened, identified, and treated by qualified professionals.

Data from the **Nicaraguan** MoH National Nutrition Census, indicate that the situation of acute malnutrition in the communities of the "Dry Corridor" is higher than the national average (4.3%). Acute malnutrition affects children under one year of age more (7.8%), doubling the national average rate. Exclusive breastfeeding (protective factor in emergencies) is 12% (national average 51%). Severe malnutrition in Nueva Segovia reached 4.8% (SMART ACH-UNICEF Survey 2021), while the national average is 1.4% (Nutritional Census 2022). In addition, according to Surveillance Nutrition System (2018), the prevalence of anemia in children under 5 years of age was 25.4%, higher in rural areas with 33.2%. The age group from 0 to 5 months presents the highest prevalence of anemia with 56.5%. The extension of the dry season beyond June 2023 could lead to a decrease in food and a consequent increase in MAM, SAM and anaemia in the northern part of the country that is part of the Dry Corridor. These effects could be magnified by the limited availability of potable water which will be exacerbated in the coming months, making breastfeeding support a key need, complementary to nutritional surveillance and treatment of children with malnutrition.

In **Guatemala**, an increase in cases of stunting has been observed, with almost 9,200 children affected (2,700 more than the previous year) of which 23% are experiencing SAM. The most affected areas are the departments of Escuintla, Sacatepéquez, Zacapa, Izabal, Retalhuleu, Santa Rosa and Chiquimula, being the most concerning the decease of nine children, six of them in Alta Verapaz.

Droughts concern **health** beyond the impact associated to water-borne diseases and malnutrition. The limited access to water and sanitation - at home, in schools and in health-care-facilities - increase the risk of spreading respiratory diseases, while dehydration, heat waves, psycho-social stress and mental health disorders are recurrent, especially in **vulnerable groups** of children, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and other persons affected by chronic health conditions.

## Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

During droughts, **access to water is reduced both in terms of quantity and quality**, increasing the risk for contracting diseases such as cholera, acute diarrhoea (e.g., typhoid) and other **water borne diseases**, especially in children living in unplanned urban dwellings. During droughts, most households receive less water than on average and face increased need for domestic water storage, often done in suboptimal storage such as containers, barrels, and water tanks without proper protection. Additionally, remaining productive water points (wells, boreholes, streams) in drought-affected zones are more vulnerable to contamination and are used by a growing number of people, and the risk of over-abstraction can threaten future water production and **foster tensions between users**. The increase of diseases is reinforced by poor sanitation and hygiene practices, compounded by the proliferation of **vector-borne-diseases** in unsafe environments (including zika, yellow fever, dengue, etc.).

**Honduras**, classified in the 'Very High' category in the INFORM Index regarding danger and exposure due to drought, had already experienced during the episodes of 2015-2018 up to 70% decreases in rainfall and up to 55% increases in waterborne diseases (e.g., diarrhoea), of which 87% of cases were children under 14 years old. Currently, seven municipalities located in the Dry Corridor, have been already affected by the worsening of access to safe WASH services.

**Gender inequities** intensify during droughts. Young girls who menstruate need water for safe personal washing and menstrual management products. Water scarcity affects women and children greater because they are often the ones responsible for collecting it. More time for collecting means less time at school, with an enormous burden aggravated by higher exposure to safety risks and exploitation while fetching water. During the last prolonged drought recorded in Honduras (2016-2020), one in four people reported an increase in violence during the emergency, including an increased risk for children and an even more pronounced risk for girls (37%) than boys (17%).

## Child Protection

Climatic shocks like droughts are increasingly intense in Central America and encumber communities and national systems already affected by **poverty, violence, and migration**. The poorest households in areas of the Honduran, El Salvadoran, Guatemalan Dry Corridor of the Western Altiplano and Alta Verapaz, and the rural areas of Nicaragua, are considered the most at-risk since they have seen their livelihoods deteriorate and have been forced to employ unsustainable coping strategies until the arrival of the first harvest in September. El Niño is expected to further **affect the capability of vulnerable households to access quality services**, including indigenous groups.

Poorest households suffer a **significant narrowing of income generation** options, which leads to high-risk activities that can lead to progressive draining of economic assets and stocks, and increasing inequality and marginalization for the most vulnerable.

Children are most at risk of being left with limited or no access to the essential services and may be forced into child labour to compensate for loss of agriculture and livelihoods. This change in livelihoods can produce an **increase of insecurity**, especially for women and children, with increased risk of being exposed to internal or international migration, exploitation and abuse, including sexually, as extreme survival strategies, with further **limitation of children attending schools**, due to the households needs for economic support and an increased risk of child labour and exploitation.

## Education

Priority **education needs** generated by droughts are often overlooked. Rural-urban and international migration, the impact of school feeding programs, access to educational materials and services (including preschool, back-to-school campaigns, catch-up and remedial courses for children out of schools) are all vital elements in ensuring the right of education to school-age children and adolescents.

Moreover, poor nutrition can impact the school **performance of students**, their motivation to attend school, and acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary to advance. The disruption of education and the lack of a **safe and protective environment** for children amplifies their risk of exposure to violence and other risks, especially those whose families have been fragmented due to internal displacement or migration.

Humanitarian **sectorial coordination** does not always match traditional emergency coordination structures (e.g., civil defense commissions, emergency operations centers, etc.). In the instance of El Salvador, education is not considered a technical commission by the Directorate of the Civil Defense and is thus omitted from preparedness and response planning. This produces undesirable effects on cross-sectorial coordination with other services providers such as the Ministry of Health, water operators, and child protection among others, resulting on reduced access to essential services for students, teachers and other essential school staff.

## UNICEF Response and Anticipatory Actions

UNICEF bases its response on the **Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action**,<sup>iv</sup> supported by international humanitarian and human rights law and humanitarian principles. UNICEF adapts its interventions to the local context, with participation of targeted population groups; for this it relies on local actors who provide the necessary information so that the design of the response is relevant to the targeted communities. For the humanitarian response, UNICEF takes into consideration that there are numerous actors in humanitarian action, not only at the level of UN system agencies, but also at the level of international and national organizations, as well as strong leadership from the government, who together, and in coordination, should be able to respond effectively to any emergency.

**In the Health sector**, UNICEF bridges the gap of national capacity to ensure access to life-saving maternal and child-care. The provision of emergency medicine, medical supplies, sexual and reproductive health services, and adequate access to mental health services to affected populations mitigates threats to maternal and child survival. Drought-induced intra-regional migration patterns place additional pressure on already-stretched thin services, including immunization and sexual and reproductive healthcare.

UNICEF response is focused on **preventing nutritional and health deterioration of children** and pregnant and breastfeeding women. Interventions focus on the strengthening of **nutritional surveillance** of children under 5 years of age to ensure early detection and management of cases of SAM and MAM, with ready-to-eat therapeutic food, supplementary fortified food and supplementary micronutrients, to children from 6 to 59 months of age along with pregnant and lactating women.

Caregivers are a priority target for **Infant and Young Child Feeding counselling** (IYCF), typically provided by health personnel in primary health care facilities, shelters, nutritional care centers, and spaces safe for the **promotion of breastfeeding**. Community participation mechanisms are considered key to engage caregivers on early detection of malnutrition risks, build capacities of community leaders, midwives and **peer-support networks**, and effective **coordination between health and education institutions, especially in school campaigns for deworming or iron fortification programmes**.

UNICEF's humanitarian response in **WASH** is focused on reducing mortality and morbidity linked to waterborne diseases and poor hygiene practices through ensuring immediate availability of safe water, critical hygiene supplies, sanitation facilities, with gender-conscious delivery considerations. The WASH response includes hygiene promotion components to reinforce the distribution of hygiene supplies and is accompanied by risk communication to promote disease prevention and control, manage solid waste, and engage communities on improving climate resilience of existing systems and facilities. In addition, UNICEF holds the mandate to coordinate the WASH platforms or Clusters at global and country level, ensuring sectoral minimum requirements for relevant, timely and coordinated humanitarian response by humanitarian stakeholders.

UNICEF commits to **providing a protective space for children and adolescents in emergencies** along with their caregivers. The implementation of child-friendly spaces is one of multiple components in a strategy to prevent violence and is accompanied by the provision of **psycho-emotional care** and play activities for children to develop strategies to manage distress related to emergency events. Psychological first aid (PFA) can effectively reduce psycho-emotional harm and potentially prevent long-term

effects through **early detection and referral to specialized services**. Culturally competent PFA is critical in preventing and responding to gender-based and interpersonal violence in low-resource settings.

**Coordination is established with national and local authorities** to ensure early identification, attention and case management of **unaccompanied or separated children** and victims of domestic and gender-based violence. Coordination with local partners such as universities allows UNICEF to tap into resourced **networks** of community mental health providers and specialized care services in the territory.

As global education sectorial co-lead, UNICEF can activate a broad network of local and international actors to ensure uninterrupted educational services. Provision of individual learning materials, access to psychosocial services, and abridged curriculum allows education to reach the most vulnerable children. During drought, young girls and indigenous populations suffer greatest from learning loss, and the use of coordinated educational media campaigns can mitigate school drop-out.

A rapid response utilizing strong participation of partners and data for emergency preparedness can bridge the gap for children, communities and educational providers. **Flexible educational modalities** that allow for face-to-face or virtual educational continuity, materials for learning and playing for different age groups, and tools implementing life skills and vocational training are a priority.

UNICEF's support to sectorial and cross-sectorial **humanitarian coordination** ensures linkage between protection, health, education, WASH and other institutions' services and infrastructures. Coordination is considered critical to ensure immediate response to affected areas, while strengthening quality wash services provision especially in safe spaces, learning and health care facilities.

Within this expected response, UNICEF is planning a series of **anticipatory actions** that, whenever funds would be made available, will allow enhanced standing capacity for impact mitigation and early response. Among others, UNICEF will contemplate: the early distribution of chemicals and supplies for community or household water treatment and storage; installation of rainwater catchment systems to allow maximum collection capacity - for the few rains that will actually occur in the next few months; procurement and pre-position of therapeutic food and micronutrients for children with severe and moderate acute malnutrition, pregnant and nursing women; establishment of targeting and cash distribution mechanisms for humanitarian cash transfers; and coordination with educational communities to support nutritional vigilance at community level among other.

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<sup>i</sup> Sistema de la Integración Centro Americana (SICA), 'Informe LXXI Foro del Clima de América Central Perspectiva del Clima para el período mayo a julio 2023', April 2023.

<sup>ii</sup> Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET), 'Inflation and macroeconomic conditions drive food insecurity across the region, with erratic rainfall and drought conditions also increasing needs in Central America and the Caribbean', <<https://fews.net/latin-america-and-caribbean/key-message-update/may-2023>>, accessed 21 June 2023.

<sup>iii</sup> OCHA, 'Humanitarian Response Plan Honduras 2023', February 2023.

<sup>iv</sup> UNICEF Core Commitments for Children in Humanitarian Action – CCCs, <[https://www.unicef.org/media/87611/file/Core%20Commitments%20for%20Children%20\(English\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/media/87611/file/Core%20Commitments%20for%20Children%20(English).pdf)>