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# FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS

THE CHILDREN OF YEMEN

unicef 

for every child

#CHILDRENUNDERATTACK

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# RUNNING AGAINST TIME: FAMILIES TURNING TO EXTREME SURVIVAL MEASURES

As the war in Yemen completes two years, children continue to pay the heaviest price while families' coping mechanisms are stretched to their limit. Nearly 10 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Children are being robbed of their childhood as they come under attack, their future hanging in the balance, unable to learn or fulfil their potential.

Across Yemen, families are increasingly resorting to negative methods to survive. More children are recruited to fight at an ever younger age. In the past two years, the United Nations verified that at least 1,572 boys were recruited and used in the conflict, up from 850 last year. More than two thirds of girls are married off before they reach 18, compared to 50 per cent before the conflict escalated.

The poorest country in the Middle East, Yemen is now the largest food security emergency in the world. Close to half a million children suffer from severe acute malnutrition, a 200 per cent increase since 2014. Families are eating much less, opting for cheaper food or skipping meals. Around 80 per cent of families are in debt or are borrowing money, just to feed their children while every second person in the country lives on less than US\$2 a day<sup>1</sup>.

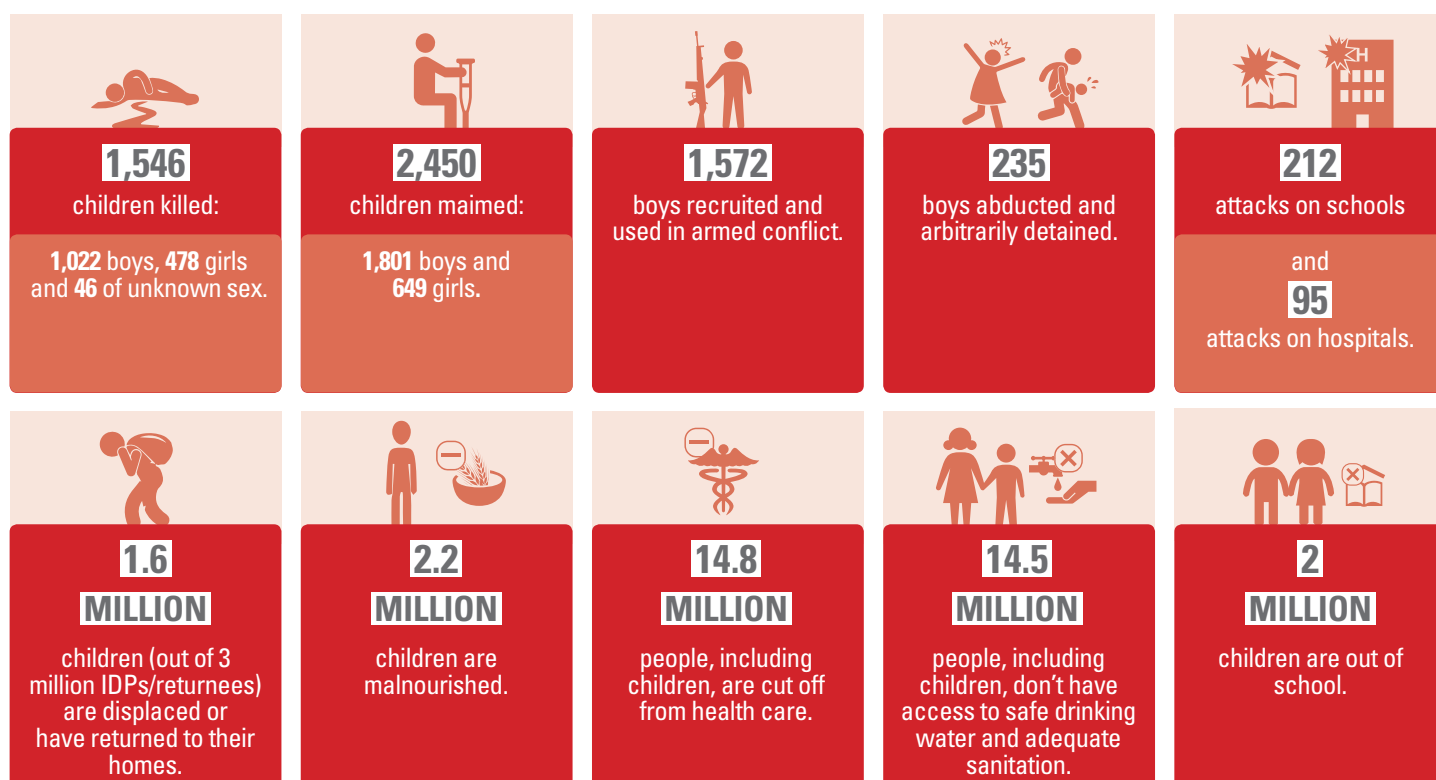
Yemen's health system is on the verge of a total collapse. Nearly 7 million children have no access to health care. An outbreak of cholera and acute watery diarrhea in October 2016 continues to spread, with over 22,500 suspected cases and 106 deaths.

Education in Yemen was severely affected as a result of the violence. Up to 1,600 schools can no longer be used because they were destroyed, damaged, being used to host displaced families or are occupied by the warring parties. Some 350,000 children are unable to continue their learning as a result, bringing to 2 million the total number of children out of school.

The key public social assistance scheme, the Social Welfare Fund's cash transfer programme, was suspended, leaving approximately 8 million people without the means to buy food, medicine and other basic supplies for survival.

## THE DEADLY TOLL ON CHILDREN

**9.6 million children (80% of all children in Yemen) need humanitarian assistance.**



Source: OCHA and UNICEF, 2017.

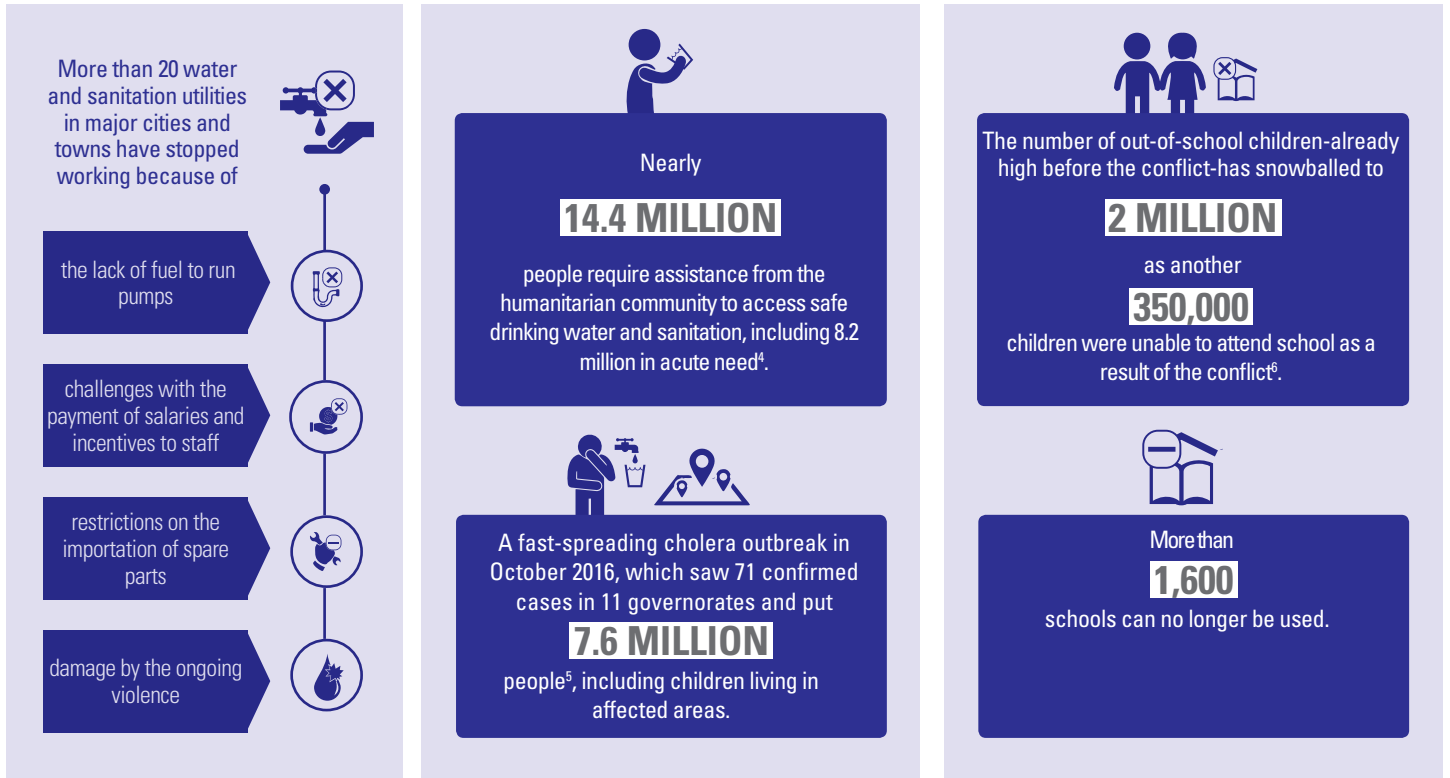
## SOCIAL SYSTEMS ARE FAILING

UNICEF estimates that every 10 minutes, at least one child dies of preventable causes like malnutrition, diarrhoea, and respiratory tract infections<sup>2</sup>.

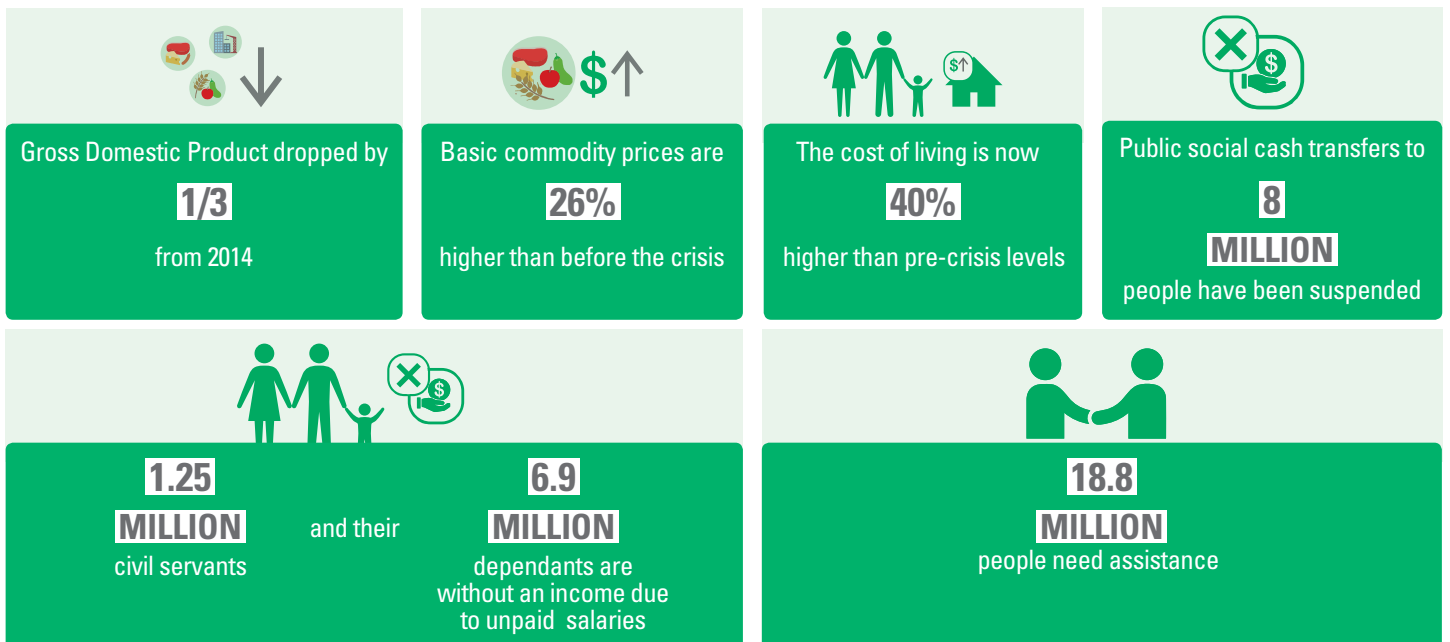
The country's water and sanitation infrastructure has been ravaged, posing serious health risks, especially to young children who quickly become malnourished from diarrhoeal diseases caused by the lack of clean water and proper sanitation. Basic social services are plunging towards total collapse in many parts

of the country as authorities run out of money and can no longer pay salaries and operate health facilities, schools, water supply and sanitation systems and social welfare programmes. Imposed restrictions on imports, movements and financial transactions are crippling the private sector and compromising the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Less than one third of the population has access to medical care, and more than half of the health facilities are non-functional<sup>3</sup>.

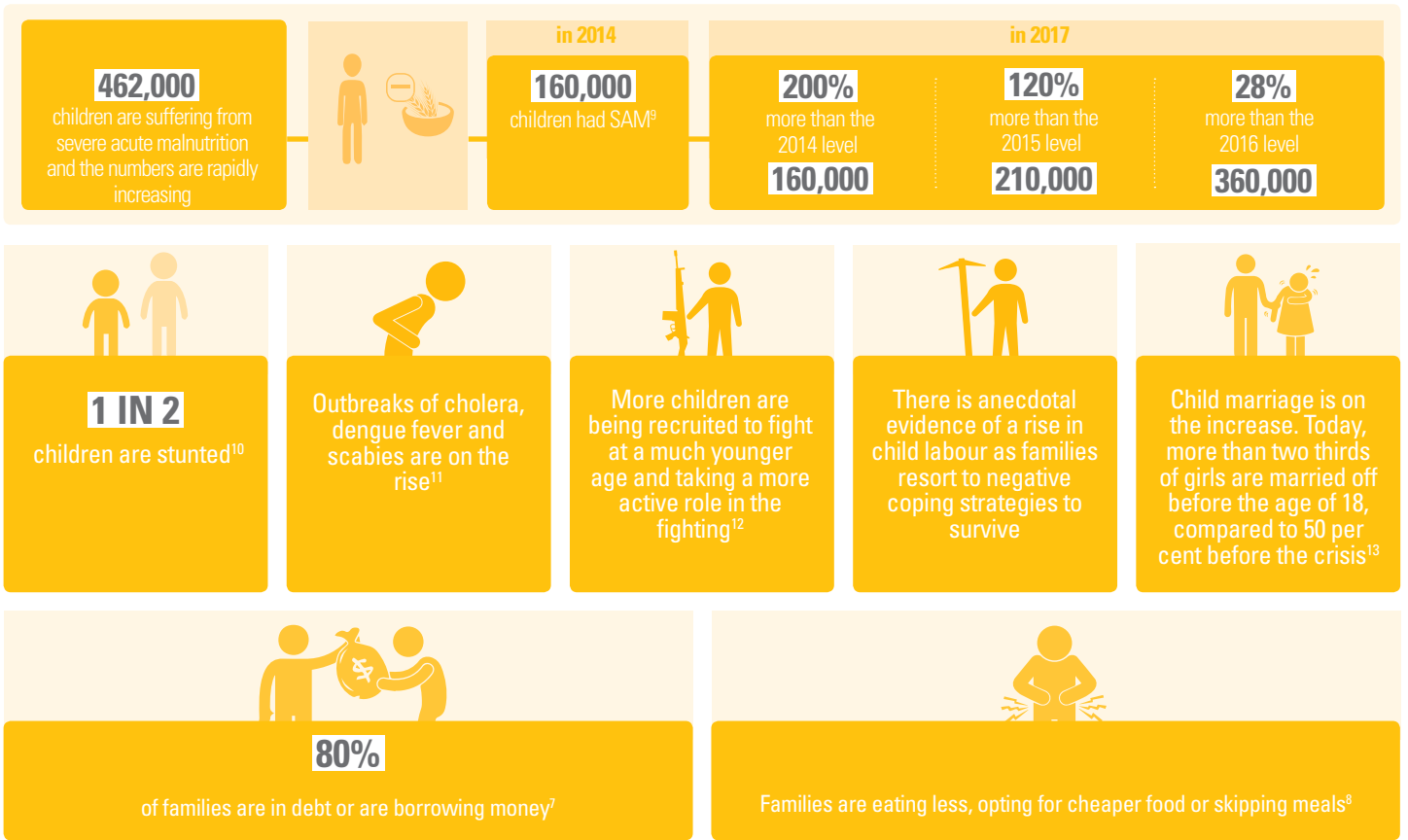


## ERODING COPING MECHANISMS



Source: Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Yemen Socio-Economic Update, Issue 21, December 2016 and UNOCHA, 2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview, Yemen, November 2016; EFSNA 2016.

# THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF WAR



Ali Ahmed Alsaïdi, 15 years old, in the 7th grade. He is working as a welder, Ali hopes to be a pilot and return to school. He wishes to live in peace. Ali is involved in very hard work and has injured himself several times.  
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## NARROW ESCAPE FROM THE HORRORS OF WAR

Before he was coerced to fight, Ahmed\*, now 17, lived a normal life with his family.

**“I was like any other child. I used to wake up and prepare to go to school. After school, I would go to pray and play with friends,”** Ahmed said.

This all changed one day. Some of his older friends who had already joined the fighting put enormous pressure on him to come with them and he eventually gave in.

**“People said that I was not a man because I refused to fight. I could not stand this,”** Ahmed said.

He spent one year working in various roles that no child should ever perform. These ranged from fighting in battles to manning check points, including for the whole night and sometimes carrying food for those on duty.

Ahmed says that there was no time to be a child. If he was not on the frontline, he had to perform other duties. It all depended on what the commander wanted.

**“I was pushed to fight by friends. I was given a weapon and I went to fight. Most of my friends were killed, some of them in battles we fought together.”**

Ahmed said looking down. Clutching his fingers, he recalled the dark moments when he narrowly escaped with his life.

When children are engaged in conflict, the physical and emotional toll can shatter their world.

**“After my friend was killed, I became sick and they gave me a break to go and get treatment. I underwent treatment for more than one month,”**

Ahmed said.

While being treated, Ahmed met a staff member from the Child and Youth Protection Organization (CYPO), a UNICEF-supported NGO that works to empower adolescents and helps them get access to basic services. With support from trained counsellors, Ahmed was helped in dealing with his shock and moving on from the horrors of life in combat. He was later enrolled in an English language course where he continues to hold out hope that Yemen will once again see peace.

**“I wish to learn and have a bright future and I really wish the war would end. Enough is enough,”** Ahmed says.

*\* His name has been changed for protection purposes.*



## A CALAMITY

Malnourished children across Yemen are teetering between life and death as the devastating conflict completes its second year. Cemeteries are filling up with small unmarked graves, the deaths of children unreported to authorities, their suffering invisible to the world.

Nearly 2.2 million children are acutely malnourished and require urgent care<sup>14</sup>. Close to half a million children suffer from severe acute malnutrition, a life-threatening condition that has seen a drastic increase of 200 per cent since 2014<sup>15</sup>.

Children suffering from severe acute malnutrition are ten times more likely to die than their healthy peers. Acute malnutrition weakens the immune system, leaving children at heightened risk of diseases. Affected children may also face life-long stunting and cognitive impairment as a result of the condition. The conflict in Yemen is now the primary driver of the largest food security emergency in the world.

More than 17 million people are currently food insecure—65 per cent of all Yemeni households (of which nearly one third are severely food insecure)<sup>16</sup>. This means that Yemenis are not able to feed themselves and their children adequately and are frequently forced to miss meals and eat food with poor nutritional value. At least 7.3 million people need emergency food assistance to survive<sup>17</sup>.

**“ Before the conflict, my husband had a job and his salary was adequate to meet our needs. When everything collapsed after the fighting started, we tried to grow vegetables in our farm but that was not safe due the violence. Now we are reduced to nothing. ”**

Um Khawla, mother of one-year-old Khawla Mohammed who is being treated for severe acute malnutrition in Al-Sabeen Hospital in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a.



A family from the marginalized community (Mohamasheen) having lunch. Sana'a.  
©UNICEF/Yemen/2015/Sami Shamsan

## CHILDREN BEAR THE BRUNT

### The plight of Yemen's children remains dire.

Children are facing long-term consequences as a result of the crisis. As families struggle for survival, negative coping mechanisms are being used to ease the burden. Child marriage is one of them, and devastating to children, especially girls.

**“ It was a hard stage in my life. I was forced to bear what I could not. I was a child who was not mentally and physically able to be a wife. I was warned not to do anything that children do. Through the window, I could watch other children play.”**

Bilkis, 16, who was married off at 13 years as the conflict in Yemen started to intensify at the end of 2014.

Child marriage has long been a scourge in Yemen, one of the few countries in the region without a legal minimum age of marriage.

According to a UNICEF study from September 2016, in six governorates, early marriage was alarmingly widespread<sup>18</sup>. Up to 72.5 per cent of female respondents (15 to 49 years) said that they got married before the age of 18 and about 44.5 per cent under the age of 15. Child marriage was especially common in Al Hudaydah, Hajjah and Ibb governorates that host large numbers of displaced people.

Parents marry off their daughters to be relieved of the cost of their care, or because they believe a husband's family can offer better protection. Families also seek dowry payments to cope with conflict-related hardship. Gender-based violence has increased by over 63 per cent<sup>19</sup>. As of January 2017, 10,806 cases of rape and other unspeakable acts of violence against girls and women<sup>20</sup> were reported since the start of the conflict.

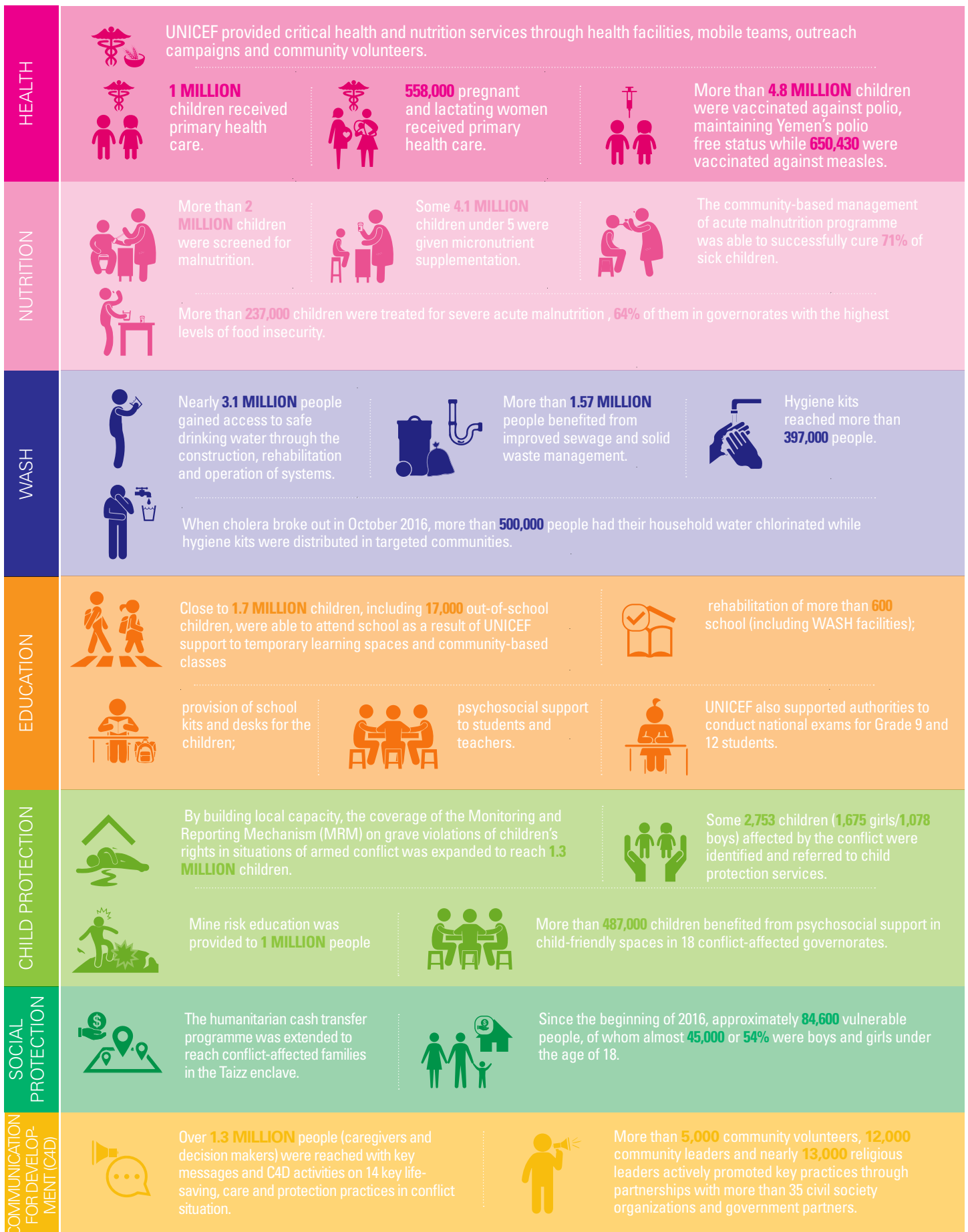


Bilkis, 16 years old, was forced to marry at the age of 13 and now she is back to her normal life after the death of her husband who was killed after he was involved as a soldier. Sana'a – Yemen, November 2017

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# UNICEF IN ACTION

Despite extremely challenging working conditions and funding gaps in 2016, UNICEF was able to reach some of the most critically affected children and families in Yemen.







## On behalf of Yemen's children, UNICEF is appealing for:

- **An immediate political solution to the war in Yemen.** Parties to the conflict must work to reach a negotiated solution, prioritizing and upholding the rights of children. The conflict must come to an immediate end if we are to spare an entire generation of children from starvation, trauma and destitution.
- **An end to all grave violations against children.** Children must be protected at all times. In line with international humanitarian law, all parties to the conflict should immediately stop attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure. Parties to the conflict must prevent all boys and girls from participating in hostilities. The killing and maiming of children must stop.
- **An immediate and massive scale-up of the multi-sectoral response to combat malnutrition among children and pregnant and lactating women.** Improving humanitarian access throughout Yemen is a must to reach the most vulnerable.
- **Strengthening family coping mechanisms by supporting the provision of free and quality basic services** - where possible at local levels - and the provision of cash assistance at scale. More funding is needed to prevent critical and basic services like health and education from total collapse. Assistance through cash transfers to families should be expanded to prevent families from having to resorting to negative coping mechanisms like early marriage, child labour and child recruitment.

A child suffering from acute malnutrition being screened by a doctor. Bani Al-Harith, Sana'a, Yemen.  
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UNICEF is providing school bags for children in the remote and unreachable areas in Yemen. Alhudaidah remote areas, Yemen November 21, 2016  
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