



CHILD FOOD POVERTY

Nutrition deprivation in early childhood

2024 | Child Nutrition Report | Report Brief

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REPORT BRIEF

Across the world, millions of parents and families are struggling to provide the nutritious and diverse foods that young children need to grow, develop and learn to their full potential. Growing inequities, conflict and climate crises, combined with rising food prices, the overabundance of unhealthy foods, harmful food marketing strategies and poor child feeding practices, are condemning millions of children to child food poverty.

UNICEF has introduced the concept of **child food poverty** to bring dietary deprivation and poor quality diets in early childhood to the forefront of global efforts to achieve the nutrition targets of the Sustainable Development Goals. **UNICEF defines child food poverty as children’s inability to access and consume a nutritious and diverse diet in early childhood (i.e., the first five years of life).**

Child food poverty harms all children, but it is particularly damaging in early childhood when insufficient dietary intake of essential nutrients can cause the greatest harm to child survival, physical growth and cognitive development. The consequences can last a lifetime: children deprived of good nutrition in early childhood do less well at school and have lower earning capacity in adulthood, trapping them and their families in a cycle of poverty and deprivation.

Child food poverty is measured using the UNICEF and World Health Organization (WHO) dietary diversity score. To meet the *minimum dietary diversity* for healthy growth and development, children need to consume foods from **at least five out of the eight** defined food groups.

If children are fed:	0–2 food groups/day they are living in severe child food poverty	3–4 food groups/day they are living in moderate child food poverty	5 or more food groups/day they are not living in child food poverty				
 Breastmilk	 Grains, roots, tubers and plantains	 Pulses, nuts and seeds	 Dairy products	 Flesh foods (meat, poultry and fish)	 Eggs	 Vitamin A-rich fruits and vegetables	 Other fruits and vegetables

OUR RESEARCH

UNDERSTANDING CHILD FOOD POVERTY

This global report examines the status, trends, inequities and drivers of child food poverty in early childhood, including the impact of global and local food and nutrition crises. The report focuses on low- and middle-income countries, where most children living in child food poverty reside, and on the implications of child food poverty for undernutrition and poor development.

The analyses used data from the UNICEF Global Database on Infant and Young Child Feeding, comprising data from 670 nationally

representative surveys conducted in 137 countries and territories, and representing more than 90 per cent of all young children globally.

We also analysed national survey data to identify determinants of severe child food poverty and the extent to which severe child food poverty predicts child undernutrition. In addition, we analysed data from rapid assessments conducted in low- and middle-income countries to examine the barriers experienced by parents and families in feeding young children in the communities affected by food and nutrition crises.



OUR FINDINGS

THE CRISIS OF SEVERE CHILD FOOD POVERTY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

Our six key findings uncover the scale of severe child food poverty in early childhood globally, the slow progress in lowering severe child food poverty, the presence of severe child food poverty in children living in poor and non-poor households, and how children living in severe child food poverty are missing out on many nutritious foods that are essential to survival, growth and development.

Finding 1. Globally, one in four children (27 per cent) are living in severe child food poverty in early childhood, amounting to 181 million children under 5 years of age.

Severe child food poverty affects all regions of the world, but not equally: South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are home to more than two-thirds (68 per cent) of the 181 million children living in severe child food poverty.

Twenty countries account for almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of the total number of children living in severe child food poverty: Afghanistan, Bangladesh,

China, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Somalia, South Africa, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania and Yemen.

Finding 2. Globally, progress towards ending severe child food poverty is too slow, but some regions and countries are proving that progress is possible and is happening.

In the subset of 64 countries with trend data, there was minimal change in the percentage of children living in severe child food poverty during the last decade (34 per cent in 2012 to 31 per cent in 2022); the prevalence did not change in 32 countries and increased in 11 countries.

However, in West and Central Africa, severe child food poverty fell by one quarter (42 per cent to 32 per cent). Twenty-one countries – about one in three countries of the 64 with trend data – achieved a significant reduction in severe child food poverty.

Severe child food poverty affects 1 in 4 children, globally

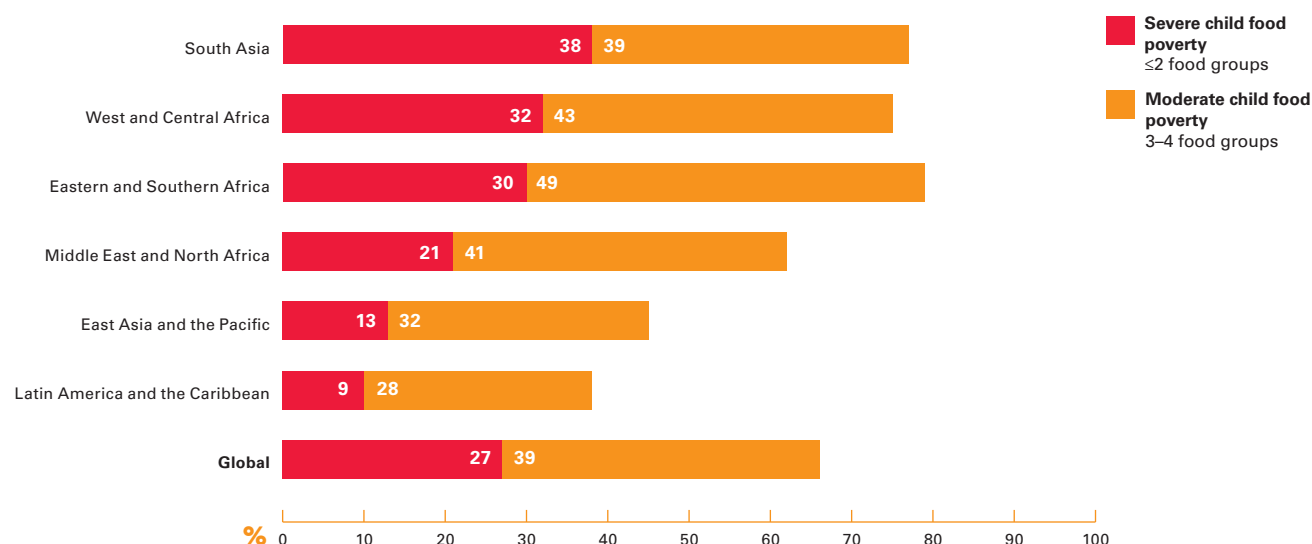


FIGURE 1: Percentage of children living in severe child food poverty and moderate child food poverty, by UNICEF region and global, 2022

Source: UNICEF global databases, 2023.

Finding 3. Severe child food poverty is experienced by children belonging to poor and non-poor households, indicating that household income is not the only driver of child food poverty.

Of the 181 million children living in severe child food poverty, about half (84 million, or 46 per cent) belong to households in the two poorest wealth quintiles, among whom income is likely to be a major driver of severe child food poverty.

The remaining 97 million children (54 per cent) living in severe child food poverty belong to households in the middle and two upper wealth quintiles, among whom factors other than income poverty are driving the problem.

Finding 4. Children living in severe child food poverty are missing out on many nutrient-rich foods, while unhealthy foods are becoming entrenched in their diets.

Among children living in severe child food poverty, four out of five are fed only breastmilk and/or dairy products and/or a starchy staple, such as rice, maize or wheat. Less than 10 per cent are fed fruits and vegetables and less than 5 per cent are fed eggs, meat, poultry and fish.



Meanwhile, unhealthy foods and beverages are consumed by an alarming proportion of children living in severe child food poverty, displacing more nutritious foods from their diets. In Nepal, for example, 42 per cent of children living in severe child food poverty consume foods high in sugar, salt and/or fat, and 17 per cent consume sweet beverages.

Finding 5. The global food and nutrition crisis and localized conflicts and climatic shocks are intensifying severe child food poverty, especially in fragile and humanitarian settings.

Since 2020, the economic fall-out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and localized conflicts and climatic shocks have exacerbated the challenges that parents and families face in feeding their young children. In vulnerable communities in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Somalia, more than 80 per cent of parents reported that their child had been unable to eat for an entire day because of a lack of money or other resources.

One in three children in fragile countries are living in severe child food poverty. For children in extremely fragile countries, the percentage affected by severe child food poverty can soar to exceptionally high levels, such as in Afghanistan (49 per cent), Somalia (63 per cent), and most recently in the Gaza Strip in the State of Palestine (9 out of 10 children living in severe child food poverty between December 2023 and April 2024).

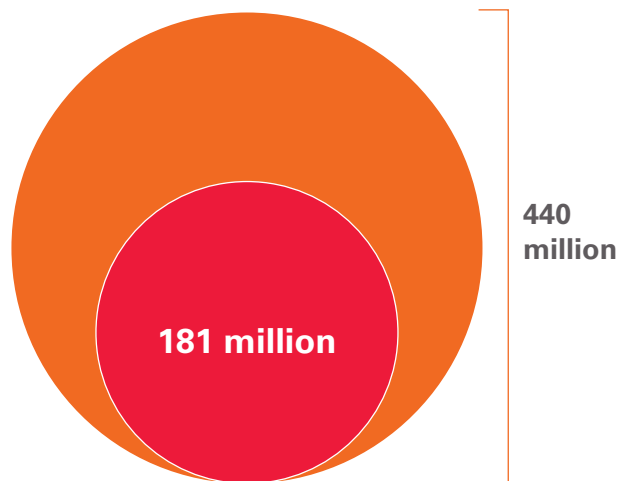
Finding 6. Severe child food poverty is driving child undernutrition; the proportion of children living in severe food poverty is three times higher in countries with a high prevalence of stunting.

Severe child food poverty is associated with child undernutrition. One in three children (33 per cent) experience severe child food poverty in countries with a high prevalence of stunting, compared to one in nine (11 per cent) in countries with a low prevalence; and the odds of stunting are 34 per cent higher in children affected by severe child food poverty compared to children who are not affected.

Similarly, the percentage of children living in severe child food poverty is more than double in countries with a high compared to low prevalence of wasting (35 per cent versus 14 per cent), and the odds of wasting are 50 per cent higher if a child is affected by severe child food poverty.

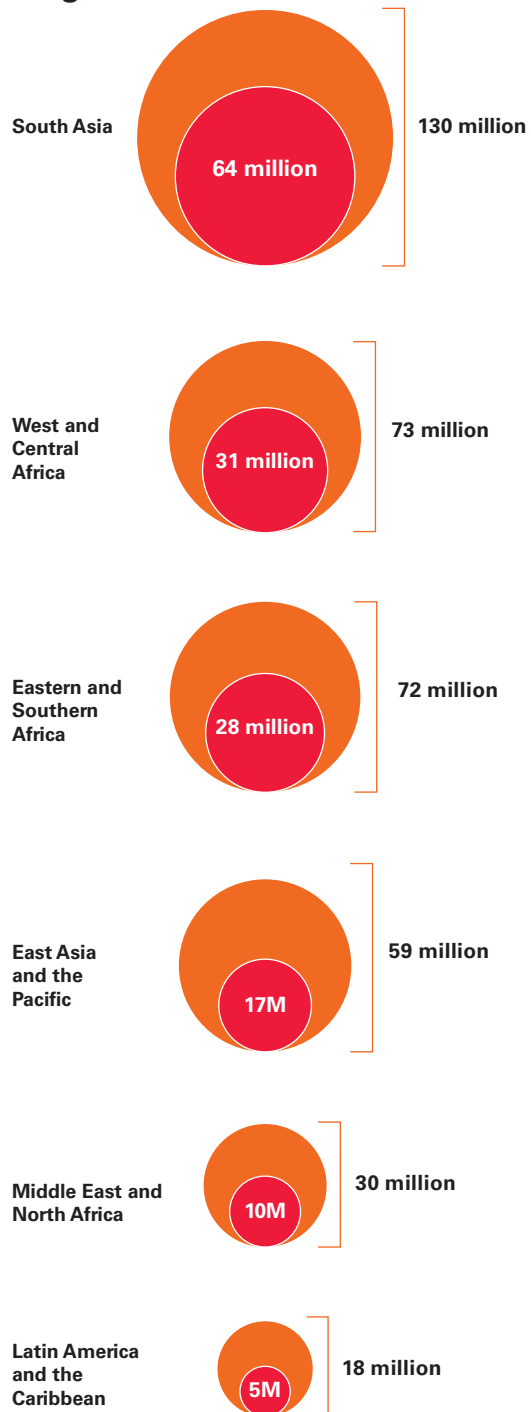
How many children are experiencing child food poverty and where do they live?

Global



Globally,
440 million
children under 5 are living in
child food poverty,
of which
181 million
children under 5 are living in
severe child food poverty

Regional



- Total child food poverty
≤4 food groups
- Severe child food poverty
≤2 food groups

FIGURE 2: Number of children living in food poverty and severe child food poverty (in millions), by UNICEF region and globally, 2022

Source: UNICEF global databases, 2023.

Severe child food poverty by country

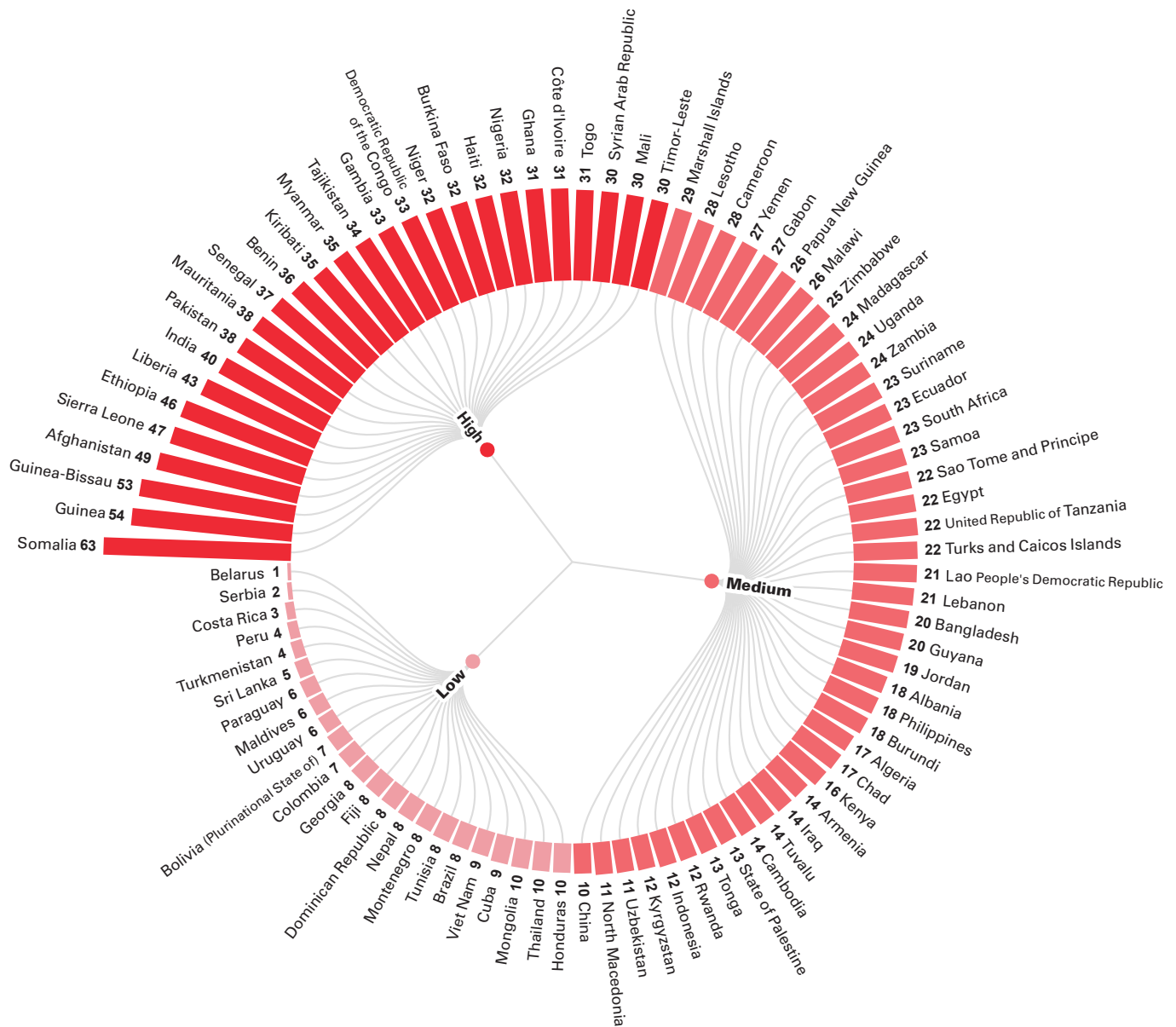


FIGURE 3: Percentage of children living in severe child food poverty, by country

Source: UNICEF global databases, 2023. The prevalence of severe child food poverty in each country is classified as 'high' ($\geq 30\%$), 'medium' ($10-\leq 30\%$) or 'low' ($< 10\%$).

OUR ANALYSIS

THE FORCES DRIVING SEVERE CHILD FOOD POVERTY

Our analysis identifies three major drivers of severe child food poverty: **poor food environments** for children, **poor feeding practices** in early childhood, and **household income poverty** affecting children and their families. The food, health and social protection systems are failing children's right to good food and nutrition. However, progress in reducing severe child food poverty is possible when action is taken to activate these systems.

Severe child food poverty is driven by poor food environments, poor feeding practices and household income poverty

Poor food environments are disrupting access to nutritious and diverse diets. In rural, remote and fragile settings, adverse weather, climatic shocks, insecurity or poor roads can disrupt food production and/or physical access to affordable

nutritious foods. This creates food deserts where meeting children's minimum dietary diversity becomes impossible. Meanwhile, the overabundance of nutrient-poor ultra-processed foods in shops and markets is an ever-growing challenge for families throughout the world, particularly in – but not limited to – urban areas. These foods are low in essential nutrients and high in sugar, salt and unhealthy fats; they are often cheaper than healthier, nutritious options and made more desirable by aggressive marketing strategies.

Poor feeding and care practices undermine young children's diets. Poor practices and beliefs concerning the foods that young children should be fed and types and amounts of foods that children can safely consume and digest are passed from one generation to the next and



between peers. This occurs particularly when there is a lack of accurate information, effective counselling and support on child feeding for parents and families. In addition, discriminatory gender and patriarchal norms persist in some countries, impeding women's access to information and education, limiting women's income-earning opportunities, and denying mothers the autonomy to make food purchase decisions for their young children.

Household income poverty means that families cannot afford nutritious and diverse diets for their children. Families living in extreme income poverty struggle to afford nutritious foods, particularly animal-source foods (eggs, meat, poultry, fish and dairy) and fruits and vegetables. Nutritious foods cost much more per calorie than staple foods, especially in lower-income countries, and food inflation is pushing these foods further out of reach for parents, families and their young children. In these contexts, full stomachs – not nutritious food – tend to be a priority for income-poor families.

Severe child food poverty is the result of systems that are failing, not families that are failing

Parents and families have a responsibility to feed and care for their young children, but the forces that lead to severe child food poverty – poor food environments, poor feeding practices and household income poverty – are beyond their full control. These forces persist because the food, health and social protection systems are failing to improve physical and financial access to affordable nutritious and diverse foods and are failing to equip parents and families with the knowledge, skills and support they need to feed these foods to their children. And these systems are ill-equipped to cope with the global and local impacts of conflict, climatic shocks and economic crises.

Food systems are failing to provide children with the diets they need for healthy growth and development. Food systems are not providing millions of families and young children with adequate access to affordable, nutritious and diverse foods, including eggs, meat, poultry, fish, milk, fruits, pulses and vegetables. At the same time, shops and markets are flooded with an overabundance of aggressively marketed ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages that are low in essential nutrients for children's growth and development and high in sugar, salt and unhealthy fats.

Health systems are failing to provide families with the essential nutrition services young children need.

In particular, parents, families and communities have insufficient access to timely and quality information, counselling and support on child feeding. Health and nutrition workers in primary health care facilities and in communities are insufficient in numbers and often have inadequate training, supportive supervision, remuneration and clear accountabilities for delivering information, counselling and support services on child feeding to parents and families.

Social protection systems are failing to protect vulnerable children against malnutrition in early childhood. Three out of four children worldwide (74 per cent) do not have any form of social protection, leaving them exposed to economic hardship, social exclusion and severe child food poverty. Where social protection programmes are available, they are often fragmented in scope, inadequate in coverage and benefit size, inflexible to changing needs and disconnected from nutrition services, limiting the potential to prevent severe child food poverty.

Progress is possible when action is taken to activate the food, health and protection systems

Progress towards ending child food poverty is happening today, across countries and continents. For example, over the last decade Burkina Faso and Nepal have reduced the prevalence of severe child food poverty by half and Rwanda has reduced the prevalence by one third, while Peru has maintained the prevalence below 5 per cent since 2014 – despite the considerable challenges caused by the global food and nutrition crisis.

A combination of actions across the food, health and social protection systems makes progress possible.

Countries that have reduced severe child food poverty have several success factors in common: they have improved the supply of nutritious foods and strengthened food environments (food system); expanded the coverage and quality of nutrition services for young children, including child feeding counselling at community level (health system); and protected poor households from income poverty (social protection system). They also share strong political commitment to child nutrition and nutrition governance – including multisector plans, multisector coordination, results-based budgeting, and robust progress monitoring.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

ENDING SEVERE CHILD FOOD POVERTY

Growing inequities, conflict and climate crises, household income poverty, the overabundance of unhealthy foods, harmful food marketing strategies, and poor child feeding practices are condemning millions of children to severe food poverty in early childhood.

The scale of severe child food poverty, the slow progress over the past decade, and the escalating threats to young children's diets – combined with the impacts of severe child food poverty on child survival, growth and development – demand a step change in commitment, actions and accountability.

While contexts vary, the core agenda to end severe child food poverty includes coordinated and synergistic actions in development and humanitarian contexts to:

1. Position child food poverty elimination

as a policy imperative and child food poverty reduction as a metric of success towards achieving global and national nutrition and development goals, with time-bound targets and results in relevant sectoral and multisectoral plans.

2. Transform food systems by ensuring food environments make nutritious, diverse and healthy foods the most accessible, affordable and desirable option for feeding young children, and the food and beverage industry complies with policies and regulations to protect children from unhealthy foods and beverages.

3. Leverage health systems to deliver essential nutrition services to prevent and treat child malnutrition – including community-based counselling, support and services to improve feeding and care practices in early childhood – prioritizing the most vulnerable children.

4. Activate social protection systems to address income poverty in ways that are responsive to the food and nutrition needs of vulnerable young children and their families, including social transfers (cash, vouchers and food) to protect children at highest risk of child food poverty.

5. Strengthen data systems to assess the prevalence and severity of child food poverty and identify its drivers; detect increases in child food poverty early, including in fragile and humanitarian contexts; and track national and global progress in reducing severe child food poverty.



To make freedom from severe child food poverty a reality for all children – including the most vulnerable – governments, together with development and humanitarian organizations, civil society and media, academia and research organizations, and the food and beverage industry must urgently commit to a bold and broad response. Crucially, these stakeholders must hold themselves and each other accountable for delivering on commitments to transform, leverage and activate the food, health and social protection systems:

Governments

- Ensure policy and regulatory frameworks across the food, health and social protection systems support coherent actions to address the drivers of severe child food poverty and are free of conflicts of interest, including with the food and beverage industry.
- Include time-bound targets and results to reduce severe child food poverty in relevant sectoral and multisectoral plans; allocate proportionate domestic and external resources; assign accountabilities to achieve targets and results; and review progress every year.
- Invest in data and monitoring systems to track progress on severe child food poverty and conduct rapid assessments for the early detection and monitoring of severe child food poverty in fragile contexts and during humanitarian crises.

Development and humanitarian organizations

- Elevate severe child food poverty reduction as a requirement for achieving national and global nutrition targets and as a metric of success in protecting children's food and nutrition rights.
- Develop the capacity of national and local governments and other partners to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate policy, regulatory and programme actions to reduce severe child food poverty.
- Support a global mechanism to track global and country progress to reduce severe child food poverty; and develop rapid approaches for the early detection and monitoring of severe child food poverty in fragile settings and humanitarian crises.

Civil society and media

- Advocate with governments and influential leaders for political support and resources to eliminate child food poverty and build public awareness and opinion on the imperative to act.
- Track investments and monitor the actions of governments, partners and donors to end severe child food poverty and bring attention to major shortfalls.
- Demand that food and beverage companies fully comply with policies, laws and standards to protect children from unhealthy foods and beverages, and draw attention to unacceptable policies, practices and products.

Financial partners

- Declare severe child food poverty as an explicit priority within financial partners' agendas, policies and strategies for reducing child malnutrition in both development and humanitarian contexts.
- Commit and deliver financial investments to reduce severe child food poverty, targeting countries and populations most in need.
- Secure global commitments for ending severe child food poverty; leverage resources from other financial partners; and coordinate and align financial support to countries.

Food and beverage industry

- Ensure that company policies, practices and products fully comply with policies, laws and standards to protect children from unhealthy foods and beverages, including the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions (the Code).
- Never seek to delay, prevent or weaken national and international policies, laws or standards to protect children from unhealthy food environments, including the regulation of unhealthy foods and beverages and the implementation of the Code.
- Invest in the manufacture and promotion of nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable foods that are low in sugar, salt and unhealthy fats for young children and their families.

Academic and research organizations

- Prioritize data and evidence gaps that are holding back effective policy and programme action to reduce severe child food poverty at global, regional, country and subnational levels.
- Identify context-specific barriers and enablers to nutritious and diverse diets in early childhood across the food, health and social protection systems in specific contexts.
- Conduct studies, research and evaluations to examine the factors, processes and innovations that enable system-specific and multi-system actions to reduce severe child food poverty.

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