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Starving for Change: Fighting Hunger and Malnutrition in Yemen

Every day, millions of people around the world struggle to access enough nutritious food to live healthy lives. While hunger is a global issue, few countries have experienced a crisis as severe as Yemen. According to humanitarian organizations, approximately 2.4 million children under the age of five in Yemen suffer from acute malnutrition, with thousands more facing severe levels of malnutrition, the most deadly form of this ailment. Many years of armed conflict, the huge economic collapse of Yemen, and limited access to healthcare due to the wars have turned this beautiful country into the site of one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. Families who once bought food for themselves now have to worry about the possibility of not being able to put food on the table because of these many factors. Because of this, there are many things that need to be achieved in order for Yemen to be restored to its original glory.

To start off with a basic overview of Yemen, it has a population of around 28 million people (Varisco, 2019), with a significant portion of this population suffering from malnutrition. One study of the Arab region finds a large rural-urban nutrition gap in Yemen, with most of the malnutrition being found in rural areas (Sharaf & Rashad, 2016). To put into perspective just how many people in Yemen are going through food insecurity and malnutrition issues, over 7.6 million people are facing severe food insecurity, and around 2 million of those people are malnourished (Alsanoy et al., 2020). In the context of percentages, this means that over 54% of households are food insecure, and a whopping 22% of households are severely food insecure.

One factor that leads to this big discrepancy in malnutrition is the fragmented government leadership in the country of Yemen. Many papers and articles suggest Yemen's prolonged civil wars and competing authorities since 2015 are a direct cause of such big gaps

between being nourished and not being nourished (Tappis et al., 2020). In addition, crop production has gone down by 20.02% since 2015, and agriculture's share of the GDP dropped from 17% to 9% from 2015–2021 (Abdullah & Dokuzlu, 2025).

Some of the things that Yemen contributes to the global economy are grains such as wheat, maize, and barley, as well as cash crops such as tobacco, cotton, and sesame. Before the many events that caused Yemen's economy to plummet, it used to be more agriculturally self-sufficient. As of today, it is food-import dependent, and agricultural production has significantly decreased. Last but not least, Yemen is known as one of the most water-scarce countries on the globe. This creates another major challenge for farmers who are already dealing with conflict, poverty, and damaged agricultural systems.

Moreover, the mean household size in Yemen is a staggering 7.5 people, with about 1.3 of those people being under the age of five. This is important because the extremely high mean number of people in each household has a direct impact on how much food a family needs to produce or buy due to the high number of people who may be hungry at the same time. Many households among the rural poor reached considerably high mean household sizes of up to 8.7–8.9 members.

In a jobs context, many adults work in elementary or grade school occupations, with other common jobs including construction, manufacturing, and agriculture. These sectors are some of the worst-affected sectors and often include some of the lowest-paying jobs available to citizens. This means that a high share of households mainly depend on casual work and significantly low-paying jobs, further increasing the malnutrition epidemic. The World Bank states that there is a “high precarity” of livelihoods and shrinking access to income nationwide. This evidence means that with income shrinking a significant amount, it will be a lot harder to

put food on the table and to find relief from the effects of malnutrition. This, in combination with a lot of the other factors, makes the effort to fight against malnutrition in Yemen a lot harder for relief programs and the government alike.

In addition, food served at educational facilities provides only 18% of the daily energy these children obtain, according to various sources. This shows just how much humanitarian aid is needed to support the country. With the displacement rate being a staggering 24% due to widespread conflict, it only adds more fuel to the fire of the many negative things happening in Yemen.

The Impact of Malnutrition on Food Security

The next thing to talk about to further understand the effect that malnutrition has on the country of Yemen is the impact that malnutrition has on food security. Malnutrition in Yemen is both a result of and a driver of the country's food security crisis. Conflict, displacement, economic collapse, and damage to agriculture and infrastructure have pushed many families below the poverty line.

In one region named Southern Hudaydah, over half of the households (54%) were under some form of food insecurity, and roughly 22% were severely food insecure. Children and mothers alike were acutely malnourished because of the terrible conditions in the country. Because of this long-term food insecurity, people become weaker and more likely to get sick with ailments such as cholera, a bacterial disease that can cause diarrhea and severe dehydration and can be fatal if not treated as quickly as possible. War and crisis have also severely damaged agriculture and water systems, which in turn hurts the environment and makes it even harder than it already is to grow food. (Demurtas, Alessandro)

Immediate Solution: Cash and Food Assistance

One solution that could help Yemen with its malnutrition crisis is to provide cash-based assistance in struggling rural and urban areas. Different trials have had results showing increased purchases of non-staple foods and greater child dietary diversity, with even some of the poorest households showing significant gains. Furthermore, randomized comparisons of cash and food assistance in rural Yemen showed that cash led to more diverse, higher-quality diets that included foods such as meat and fish. This means that giving cash-based assistance to people in Yemen can sometimes impact them more than only providing food-based solutions.

In Yemen, humanitarian efforts such as the WFP (World Food Programme) have implemented general food assistance, cash assistance, nutrition programs, school feeding, livelihoods, resilience, and logistics support. These efforts have prevented mass starvation and supported the food system, but dependence on aid remains high while funding continues to be a problem. WFP's cash-based transfers have helped families buy food while also supporting local markets. This is especially crucial in Yemen, where a very large share of the population faces food insecurity.

Although these programs save lives, they have not reversed the country's overall food instability or solved the economic crisis. This shows why Yemen needs both immediate humanitarian assistance and long-term solutions.

Long-Term Solution: Climate-Smart Agriculture

One long-term strategy could be implementing climate-smart agriculture, integrating emergency responses with long-term strategies, and restoring agricultural production. Climate-smart agriculture could include using crops that require less water, improving irrigation

systems so that less water is wasted, restoring damaged farmland, and teaching farmers techniques that allow them to produce food under difficult environmental conditions.

However, implementing these programs in Yemen would be difficult because the country is still dealing with conflict and weak government institutions. Instead of depending only on the national government, humanitarian organizations could work directly with local communities, farmers, and trusted local organizations. Programs could begin in areas where fighting is less severe and where aid workers can safely reach farmers. Small projects could provide seeds, tools, water-saving equipment, and training to local farmers. If these smaller programs are successful, they could gradually be expanded into other areas when conditions allow.

Because Yemen is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world, water conservation would have to be a major part of any climate-smart agriculture program. Repairing local irrigation systems, collecting rainwater when possible, and helping farmers grow crops that need less water could allow communities to produce more of their own food instead of relying as heavily on imported food and humanitarian assistance.

Long-Term Solution: Jobs and Livelihood Programs

Strengthening livelihoods and creating jobs is another important long-term strategy, especially for displaced people. Livelihood programs could provide people with training and small amounts of financial assistance to start businesses, return to farming, or learn skills that can provide income. This is important because families need more than donated food to become stable. They also need a reliable way to earn money so that they can continue buying food after emergency assistance ends.

These programs would also have to take Yemen's ongoing conflict into consideration. Organizations could focus first on community-level projects that do not require a strong national government to operate. For example, local groups could help identify families most in need, while international humanitarian organizations could provide funding, training, and oversight. This would not solve Yemen's political problems, but it could help communities become more resilient while the country continues working toward greater stability.

Evidence shows that cash transfers combined with nutrition training and WFP food or cash aid can improve diets and child growth and help prevent famine. In other countries affected by conflict, such as Mali, food assistance has increased food spending, improved micronutrient availability, and protected child nutrition, especially in less directly exposed areas. Across refugee settings globally, cash, vouchers, and food transfers are common, and many studies show that beneficiaries prefer cash and that it can improve outcomes for the people living there.

Conclusion

All in all, Yemen's food insecurity and malnutrition crisis is one of the most severe in the world and is tightly linked to ongoing conflict, economic collapse, and dependence on food imports. Large surveys show high levels of acute malnutrition and food insecurity among children and women, with over half of households food insecure in some regions and many relying on harmful coping strategies such as skipping meals or sending children to live elsewhere. Research clearly shows that conflict directly worsens child nutrition, but also that well-designed cash transfer programs and “cash-plus” interventions can partly protect children's growth and diets in this difficult environment. Cash and food assistance both improve food security, and cash often leads to more diverse diets and can be cheaper to deliver.

However, Yemen's experience and wider regional evidence make clear that humanitarian aid alone cannot solve the crisis. Long-term progress requires better governance, revived agriculture, jobs and livelihood opportunities, and multisectoral policies that link emergency aid with development and climate-smart food systems. Even while conflict and weak institutions make these solutions difficult to implement, smaller community-based programs can begin building resilience now. By combining immediate food and cash assistance with long-term investments in agriculture, water conservation, and livelihoods, Yemen can begin moving from simply surviving the hunger crisis toward creating a more food-secure future.

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