



## Scaling up efforts to sustainably prevent malnutrition in protracted crises – the case for more and better financing

### Discussion Paper

This paper was developed by N4D in collaboration with Dr Aboubacar Mahamadou, Niger Ministry of Health, Dr Mohamed Ag Bendech, Niger National Information Platform for Nutrition, Karima Al-Hada'a, SUN Yemen Secretariat, Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation in Yemen, Dr Said Shamsul Islam Shams, former Coordinator of the Technical Secretariat of the National Food Security and Nutrition Agenda in Afghanistan.

The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of the institutions of the collaborating individuals.

## Introduction

This discussion paper emphasises the urgent need to scale up and restructure financing to effectively combat malnutrition in protracted crisis contexts<sup>1</sup>. The human and economic consequences of malnutrition in protracted crises are severe, exacerbated by conflict, climate change, economic instability, and humanitarian disasters.

Malnutrition remains critically high, with approximately **half of the world's stunted and wasted children living in fragile and conflict-affected contexts**. Investments in nutrition yield significant returns, with every dollar spent potentially returning \$23 in economic and societal benefits. However, international aid predominantly favours short-term humanitarian responses rather than long-term, preventative strategies - which limits the development of sustainable solutions. This paper emphasises the need to mobilise new, long-term financing from diverse sources - including domestic and international funds – and to localise decision-making and resource allocation.

The global geopolitical landscape is changing rapidly, and making the case for international development spending is increasingly hard. With the shutdown of USAID and the UK's cuts

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term "protracted crises" synonymously with "fragile and conflict affected contexts" and more specifically OECD's category of "extremely and highly fragile contexts." We use the term protracted crises to emphasise the need for long-term approaches to deal with long-term problems.

to Official Development Assistance (ODA), humanitarian organisations are fighting for even smaller pieces of the pie to tackle our planet's greatest challenges.

However, these harsh externalities make the case for investing in protracted crisis settings stronger than ever. Improving nutrition in these most unstable contexts reaps multiple benefits, including: reducing resource scarcity, creating the conditions for greater peace and prosperity; improving global health outcomes; and promoting economic growth, as communities can better engage with business as employees and consumers.

**This discussion paper recommends action in three areas:**

- 1. Diversify, prioritise, and appropriately allocate funding towards proactive, preventive nutritional measures;**
- 2. Implement risk mitigation strategies that enable safe and efficient utilisation of funds;**
- 3. Foster alliances across multiple sectors (health, education, agriculture, social protection, climate, humanitarian response) to collectively advocate for nutrition-focused funding and localisation.**

**In particular, N4D and our country partners in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Niger and Yemen call on the aid sector to:**

- (a) Mobilise new, long-term resources from domestic and international partner sources for the proactive **prevention** of malnutrition, alongside reactive responses for treatment and meeting immediate needs; and**
- (b) **Localise** resources, decision-making and capacities so that national and sub-national actors are the ultimate decision-makers and implementers of multi-sector nutrition interventions.**

Multiyear, coordinated, and localised investment in prevention is essential for breaking the cycle of malnutrition, promoting stability, and fostering sustainable development in protracted crisis settings. It leads to more sustainable and successful nutrition progress, with more effective buy-in from national and local actors and the international community. Turning commitments into action is crucial for global peace, prosperity, and human security.

We know what more and better financing for nutrition looks like, and that success is possible; but progress is painfully slow and dangerously inadequate.

Grounded in the real-world experiences of N4D's country partners, it is our hope that this discussion paper leads to fruitful reflection and discussion in national, regional and international fora – including at the Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit in Paris in March 2025, and the SUN Global Gathering in Kigali in November 2025.



## The burden of malnutrition in protracted crises

Globally, progress to tackle malnutrition remains unacceptably slow. While childhood stunting has declined slightly, **150.8 million children under five years old remain stunted, and 50.5 million children under five are wasted**. In 2023, **733 million people faced hunger** - 152 million more than in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic - erasing years of progress. Malnutrition levels now are comparable to those in 2008-2009 crisis, with devastating human consequences.

Yet, amid global economic uncertainty, geopolitical tensions, and escalating climate impacts, funding to tackle malnutrition continues to decline. The most affected are those in protracted crises where rates of malnutrition are rising due to conflict, climate change, economic shocks and other destabilising factors. According to the **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**, nearly a quarter of the global population lives in these protracted crisis contexts.

Children living in protracted crisis contexts have **higher levels of wasting and stunting** compared to children in more stable, low- and middle-income contexts (see **Figures 1 and 2**). Approximately half of all children experiencing stunting and wasting - the dominant forms of undernutrition- live in countries affected by fragility and conflict.

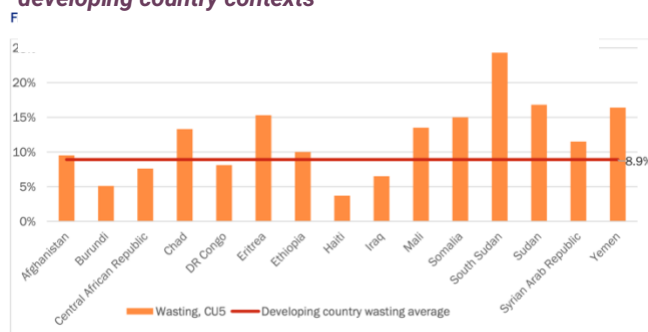
Malnutrition fuels a vicious cycle of poor health, reduced productivity, and political instability, threatening both individual lives and global stability. Addressing this crisis requires urgent, sustained investment in nutrition, especially in the world's most vulnerable regions.

## The case for investing in the prevention of malnutrition

The case for breaking this cycle of malnutrition could not be clearer:

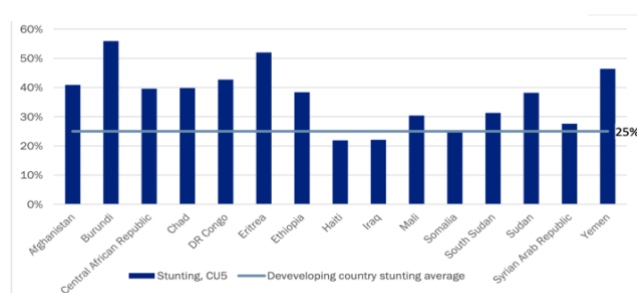
- The number of children dying before their fifth birthday is **the biggest social factor in predicting state collapse**;
- 45% of all deaths in children under the age of five are **attributable to undernutrition**;
- All countries/territories currently designated by UN bodies as **'Hotspots of highest concern'** and **'Hotspots of very high concern'** for hunger, are also classed as

**Figure 1: Childhood wasting in fragile compared to developing country contexts**



Source: (Development Initiatives 2018). Abbreviations: CU5, children under five year of age

**Figure 2: Childhood stunting in fragile compared to developing country contexts**



Source: (Development Initiatives 2018). Abbreviations: CU5, children under five year of age

**countries facing either extreme fragility or high fragility** by OECD standards.

The need for increased investment is urgent, and the economic and societal benefits far outweigh the costs of inaction:

- **Every \$1 invested in addressing undernutrition can bring a return of \$23. This is one of the highest returns on investment of any development policy.**

Good nutrition improves health, reduces pressure on healthcare systems, supports social and economic development, and helps prevent conflict and displacement. In protracted crisis settings, these stabilising effects are essential. Sustainable investments in nutrition make countries - and the world - safer, healthier, and more prosperous, ultimately saving lives and reducing long-term economic costs.

## **We know what needs to be done**

Reducing malnutrition sustainably in protracted crises demands a long-term, multi-sectoral strategy which: tackles the root causes of malnutrition; empowers local and national actors to drive lasting systems strengthening and change; and provides reliable, lifesaving treatment for acute malnutrition. This holistic approach, often referred to as the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus, ensures that efforts are not only responsive but also transformative - building resilience, fostering stability, and paving the way for a future where nations have food, health and nutrition sovereignty and communities can thrive without reliance on external aid.

To enable such an approach, more and better financing needs to be:

1. **Predictable, Flexible, and Long-Term** – Multi-year commitments allow for better planning, capacity-building and systems strengthening;
2. **Aligned with national strategic priorities**, thereby ensuring national and sub-national authorities are driving change;
3. **Coordinated** to ensure coherence between humanitarian, development, and peace efforts, promoting synergies rather than siloed approaches;
4. **Locally-driven** to enhance local ownership and sustainability;
5. **Conflict-sensitive and peace-oriented** to avoid exacerbating tensions and instead contribute to stability and social cohesion;
6. **Blended and diversified** – combining different funding sources, including grants, loans, private sector investment, and pooled funds;
7. **Results-oriented** – supported by common indicators and strengthened national information systems.

Numerous international agreements and standards - such as the **New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States**, the **Grand Bargain New Way of Working**, and the **OECD DAC Recommendation on the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus** - all commit to increasing the focus on preventing humanitarian suffering through strengthened local systems. However, despite widespread agreement on the benefits of preventing



malnutrition - and the need for greater, more effective nutrition financing - the necessary action is still falling far short.

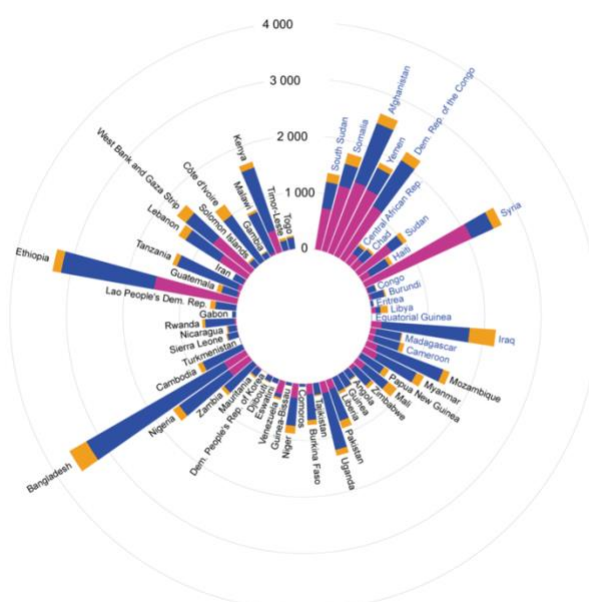
## The New Way of Working is not working

Money is tight and the number of protracted crises around the world is growing at an alarming rate. Against this backdrop, the international community is trying - with the very best intentions - to localise aid, expand humanitarian interventions, and find solutions to address as many crises as possible.

However, when it comes to malnutrition prevention and localisation in protracted crises, aid organisations are consistently missing the mark.

- Aid in protracted crisis settings is dominated by short-term humanitarian relief projects **rather than medium- to long-term planning to continuously and sustainably improve conditions for local populations.** **Figure 3** shows that in protracted crisis settings such as Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Syria, most ODA funding goes to humanitarian relief at the expense of development and peacebuilding efforts.

**Figure 3: Distribution of DAC ODA across the HDP nexus pillars according to level of fragility, 2023**



Source: [States of Fragility \(OECD, 2025\)](#)

Humanitarian financing is undoubtedly essential for saving lives - including by treating acute malnutrition. However, it is short-term and inflexible. It cannot build the sustainable, resilient systems that protracted crisis contexts require to address their populations' needs. Continuing with a dominant humanitarian response to protracted crises will only delay progress in building sustainable solutions and reducing levels of malnutrition.

- Aid for protracted crises is predominantly channelled through international actors. For example, of the **\$46.9 billion** earmarked globally for humanitarian assistance in 2022, 60% was directed to UN agencies. **In contrast, national actors received just 1.2% - a fraction of the 25% target set in The Grand Bargain commitments.** Local and national actors - those that know how best to adapt and target aid to their specific settings - are often marginalised from aid strategy decision-making processes, which is counterproductive and non-inclusive. It hinders in-country nutrition resilience-building and only perpetuates harmful power imbalances between aid donors and recipients

**The New Way of Working** principles first proposed by the UN in 2016 - to bring together humanitarian and development actors and bridge the gaps in their respective work – have been widely embraced. **There are no glaring problems with these principles; instead, there**

**is a lack of political will to translate them into concrete action.** International commitments to prevent malnutrition and localise aid are welcome - but we need to 'walk the talk.' The main obstacles to more and better financing for nutrition in protracted crisis settings that we must overcome are:

1. **Lack of Awareness** - The benefits of investing in preventing malnutrition in protracted crises are not widely known by decision-makers and the public in affected or partner countries;
2. **Overreliance on external aid** - whilst neglecting the potential for better tapping domestic public and private sector sources and accessing innovative financing solutions;
3. **Humanitarian imperative** - There is a strong humanitarian imperative to prioritise scarce resources on saving lives - but entrenched ways of working reinforce a default humanitarian response (rather than preventative or development-focused interventions);
4. **Siloed funding** - Many donor agencies and organisations operate in silos, with separate funding streams for humanitarian responses and development, limiting flexibility to shift resources toward prevention;
5. **Short-term, politically motivated funding cycles** and pressure for quick impact, which make it difficult to commit to long-term preventive investments;
6. **Conflicting political and strategic interests** – In other words, the blurring of political, humanitarian and development objectives by donor governments;
7. **Actual and perceived risks and inefficiencies** - Perceptions that it is too risky to invest in protracted crisis contexts due to weak governance, political interference and fear of legitimising undemocratic political authorities; and
8. **Limited collaboration** - The nutrition community does not adequately advocate alongside other sectors that also want (a) the prioritisation of protracted crisis contexts, and (b) an increased focus on preventing humanitarian needs.

## Seismic change is needed – how obstacles can be overcome

N4D and partner countries propose three key recommendations for the nutrition community:

1. **Diversify, reprioritise and 'right size' funding** – maximising the funding pot, focussing on the most vulnerable contexts, and making sure that sufficient funding goes towards malnutrition prevention;
2. **Mitigate risks** – ensuring money is used efficiently and effectively;
3. **Build alliances** – collectively making the case with other sectors for these reforms.

### 1. Diversify, reprioritise and right size funding

#### Diversify funding sources

With ODA in decline, diversifying sources of finance for nutrition is essential. Relying solely on traditional humanitarian funding leaves nutrition programmes at risk of disruption, especially as crises persist for years or even decades. We must engage a mix of funding sources (such as private sector investments) and mobilise domestic resources to build more resilient and responsive nutrition systems. Expanding the financial base not only

ensures continuity in lifesaving interventions but also supports long-term strategies that address the root causes of malnutrition, ultimately reducing dependency on emergency aid.

### **Prioritise protracted crisis settings and most at-risk populations**

As resources are increasingly constrained, there is a need for an open and honest conversation within the donor community about how to allocate scarce capabilities. N4D and partner countries strongly believe that protracted crisis contexts must be prioritised as: (a) the burden of malnutrition is greatest in these settings, and (b) these contexts need stability and reduced knock-on effects (such as population displacement and insecurity) for other countries.

### **'Right size' humanitarian, development and peacebuilding investments**

This recommendation will likely be the hardest for donors to implement, as it involves trade-offs between immediate, lifesaving interventions and preventative actions. We must balance investment in malnutrition prevention with the ongoing need for emergency relief programmes. Nonetheless, we advocate the guiding principle of prevention of malnutrition always, treatment when necessary and wonder if there is a need for a guiding ratio on the distribution of investments, for example for every \$1 allocated to the treatment of malnutrition, \$2 is allocated for its prevention?

It is more effective to support **treatment and prevention of malnutrition**, rather than prioritising humanitarian assistance alone or having fragmented approaches between different forms of assistance.

A preventative approach must be multisectoral to achieve transformative outcomes. Accordingly, different sectors must come together and make the case that investing in malnutrition prevention will be more cost effective in the longer term, i.e. more lives will be saved at lower cost.

## **2. Mitigate risks**

Providing development finance in protracted crises carries real risks - associated with weak governance and institutions, potential misuse of funds, political interference and legitimising undemocratic regimes. It is unwise to completely disregard these potential risks; however, donors often underestimate the feasibility of mitigating and overcoming them. With the right safeguards and capacity-strengthening approaches in place, investments can be more impactful and sustainable than commonly perceived.

### **Make the case for effective, localised action to prevent malnutrition**

There are numerous examples of initiatives that have successfully prevented malnutrition while strengthening local and national systems. For example, **the Somalia Resilience Program** (SomReP) has combined cash transfers, livelihood support, and community-based nutrition initiatives to improve food security and reduce malnutrition. In South Sudan, the **Integrated Food Security and Nutrition Programme** (IFSNP), supported by UNICEF and WFP, has delivered life-saving nutrition interventions alongside efforts to build local health system capacities. Similarly, in Yemen, the **Emergency Health and Nutrition Project** (EHNP) has provided essential nutrition services while reinforcing the national health



system through workforce training and infrastructure support. These programmes not only address immediate nutritional needs: they also enhance resilience, ensuring long-term sustainability in crisis-affected regions.

### **Differentiate between engaging at political and technical levels**

A common concern is that investing in countries with undemocratic governments and / or with poor human rights records can risk legitimising them. **However, aid investment does not imply complicity in poor governance - it is essential support for those most at risk.** Even when direct engagement with political authorities is unwise, donors can work with technocratic state institutions (rather than political entities) to ensure essential services reach vulnerable populations. Allowing institutions to collapse only increases dependence on international humanitarian aid and worsens food and nutrition outcomes.

As a result, donors should also prioritise strengthening state institutions. For example, Switzerland's approach in Niger distinguishes between political and technical engagement to enable effective, context-sensitive nutrition interventions. Supporting state institutions fosters long-term resilience, ensures service continuity, and reduces dependency on external aid. While political complexities exist, strategic support - such as direct funding for service delivery or independent oversight - can mitigate risks while ensuring aid reaches those in need efficiently and sustainably.

### **Conduct political economy analysis to guide localisation strategies**

Donors can minimise financial and reputational risk by conducting thorough political economy analysis before choosing where and how to invest. This involves detailed research of local and national actors, their interests and incentives, conduct, power dynamics, governance structures, and potential for impact on the ground. This allows donors to determine - based on their own ethos and guidelines - whether they should work with particular actors and organisations. By better understanding the political and economic interests at play, policymakers and nutrition practitioners can identify reform-minded actors and design strategies that align with local realities. This helps navigate complex political environments, ensuring that interventions are both relevant and sustainable.

The SUN Yemen Secretariat (SYS) is an example of a technical level, state entity (within the Ministry of Planning) that bridges political, sectoral and institutional divides and delivers impactful nutrition interventions for vulnerable populations. However - due to a lack of political economy analysis and international actors' unease around affiliating with Yemeni state bodies - the SYS has been consistently under-supported and overlooked, leaving at-risk communities underserved.

### **Support mutual accountability mechanisms**

Multistakeholder collaboration involving state, UN, civil society, donor and private sector stakeholders creates more joined-up, strategic and effective nutrition interventions. It ensures mutual accountability, and encourages adherence to agreed objectives, principles and ways of working, thereby reducing risk.



Supporting country-led, technical coordination mechanisms must include protections against undue political influence. For example, the governance of the Social Fund for Development (SFD) in Yemen was carefully adapted (following escalation in the conflict) to protect it from political interference and ensure funds are allocated based on need rather than vested interest. This was achieved through an independent board of directors composed of representatives from various sectors, including civil society and the private sector as well as government officials. Additionally, the SFD adopts a transparent, merit-based approach to funding allocations, relying on objective criteria and data-driven assessments. This structure has helped maintain the SFD's credibility and effectiveness, even in times of political instability.

### **3. Build alliances**

The nutrition community must collaborate with other sectors - such as health, education, agriculture, social protection, climate and humanitarian response - to make the case for investing in localised malnutrition prevention in protracted crises. By working with these sectors, the nutrition community can present a unified, evidence-based argument that focussing on prevention through local systems not only saves more lives, but also reduces long-term economic costs and promotes peace and stability.

To drive meaningful change, it is crucial to engage political decision-makers, parliamentarians, the media, and the public in donor countries, demonstrating how investing in preventive nutrition strategies contributes to global peace and prosperity. By highlighting the cost-effectiveness of early intervention and the role of nutrition in breaking cycles of poverty and conflict, advocates can build public and political good and support. Strategic communication through media and policymaker engagement can shift the narrative from reactive crisis response to proactive investment, ensuring that donor countries promote sustainable, locally-led nutrition solutions.

## **Conclusion**

In protracted crises, malnutrition continues to undermine human development and stability, with devastating consequences for individuals, societies and state institutions alike. As the international community faces diminishing resources and increasing challenges, the need for country-led, sustainable nutrition interventions has never been more urgent. By localising decision-making and increasing investment in prevention, we can build more resilient communities that are better equipped to withstand the shocks of conflict, climate change, and economic instability. The time to act is now - governments, donors, and local actors must unite to prevent malnutrition through robust local and national systems in the most fragile contexts.

## Glossary

- **Nexus approaches** – approaches to aid which acknowledge that you cannot achieve progress in one humanitarian area - e.g. conflict, health or poverty - without also taking steps to tackle others. These challenges are interconnected and must be addressed together.
- **The Humanitarian, Development and Peace nexus** – also known as the ‘triple nexus,’ this approach brings together humanitarians, development professionals and peacebuilders to protect communities from conflict and other humanitarian crises.
- **The New Way of Working** - The New Way of Working (NWOW) calls on humanitarian and development actors to work collaboratively, based on their comparative advantages, towards ‘collective outcomes’ that reduce need, risk and vulnerability over multiple years.
- **Protracted crisis settings** - synonymous with “fragile and conflict affected contexts” and more specifically the *OECD*’s category of “extremely and highly fragile contexts.” N4D uses this term to emphasise the need for long-term approaches to deal with long-term problems.
- **Stunting** - low height-for-age, the result of chronic or recurrent undernutrition, usually associated with poverty, poor maternal health and nutrition, frequent illness and/or inappropriate feeding and care in early life.
- **Undernourishment** - a condition in which an individual’s habitual food consumption is insufficient to provide the amount of dietary energy required to maintain a normal, active, healthy life
- **Wasting** - low weight-for-height, often indicating recent and severe weight loss, but it can also persist for a long time.

## To find out more, reach us via:

- **Email:** [chris@n4d.group](mailto:chris@n4d.group)
- **Website:** <https://n4d.group/>
- **Podcast:** <https://n4d.group/podcasts/>