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CHILDREN ON THE BRINK: URGENT ACTION NEEDED ON RISING DROUGHT AND FOOD INSECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND AFGHANISTAN

Policy Brief

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I. Overview

The Middle East and Afghanistan are approaching a critical tipping point as drought conditions intensify rapidly across the region. Rising temperatures, prolonged dry periods, and chronic water-management challenges, are driving alarming levels of food and water insecurity. Close to 50 million people in the Middle East and Afghanistan are experiencing [high levels of acute food insecurity](#) that threaten their wellbeing and survival. Children and young people across the region are [increasingly exposed to multiple climate shocks](#) that are disrupting their access to education and affecting their mental health. These pressures are also increasing the risk of [internal and cross-border displacement](#), and deepening tensions between communities. Children and already vulnerable families are being pushed to the brink, resorting to negative coping mechanisms to secure the food, water, and shelter needed for their survival.

[World Vision Middle East and Eastern Europe \(WV MEER\)](#) is committed to strengthening community resilience in drought-affected areas across the Middle East and Afghanistan through

a wide range of climate-smart interventions. Sustainable water access is enhanced through watershed rehabilitation, improved groundwater recharge, and the promotion of efficient water use. Our programmes also advance climate-smart agriculture and livelihood diversification, reducing households' exposure to climate-related shocks. Support to local authorities includes the establishment of early warning systems that enable timely, protective action for crops, livestock, and incomes. Together, these measures can ensure that communities and their children are better equipped to withstand and adapt to escalating drought conditions. However, the scale and pace of drought demand unified action from national authorities, international donors, and local communities. Only through collective investment and collaboration can we mitigate the deepening impacts and secure resilient futures for children and their families.

Failing to act now will leave millions of children exposed to escalating climate-driven risks that will shape their futures for decades to come.

II. Climate impact and emerging risks across the region

Lebanon is experiencing its most severe drought on record, with rainfall levels dropping by more than 50% and reservoirs reaching historic lows. Over 44% of the population is reliant on costly and unsafe water trucking, and nearly one-third is facing acute food insecurity, with tensions rising as water becomes increasingly contested.

Syria continues to see rapidly worsening food insecurity, with cereal production 60% below average, 9.1 million people food insecure, and northern regions hit hardest by drought, water scarcity, and collapsing agricultural systems that risk further displacement.

Afghanistan continues to face extreme food insecurity, with 17.5 million people thought to be in IPC Phase 3+ and nearly two million in emergency levels, driven by economic collapse, cuts in aid, and severe droughts and floods that displaced nearly 400,000 people in early 2025.



Jordan is one of the world's most water-scarce countries, with annual renewable water resources dropping below 100 cubic meters per person. Climate change, rapid growth in both host and refugee populations, and mounting financial pressures are intensifying tensions over water resources. At the same time, nearly 75% of Syrian refugees in Jordan face food insecurity in 2025, while vital food assistance continues to decline.

In the **West Bank**, severe restrictions on land and water access, damage to infrastructure, and escalating protection risks are deepening hunger and malnutrition, with families in high-risk areas experiencing forced displacement, skipped meals, deteriorating wellbeing, and shrinking livelihood options.

Iraq is undergoing one of its worst droughts in decades, with over one million people still displaced – including 168,000 due to climate shocks – while water reserves have plummeted and below-average harvests threaten livelihoods, migration, and stability.



Afghanistan continues to face high levels of acute food insecurity as repeated climate-related shocks compound an already fragile socio-economic

landscape marked by deep-rooted economic, social, and environmental vulnerabilities. The November 2025 preliminary IPC categorisation estimates that 17.5 million people will be living in crisis or worse levels of food insecurity (IPC Phase 3 and above) in the lean season of November 2025 to March 2026, with 4.6 million in emergency conditions. While a weak economy and cuts in humanitarian assistance are key drivers, [climate-induced disasters](#) such as droughts and floods are severely undermining food production, destroying livelihoods, and reducing household access to nutritious food. During [nutrition dialogues](#) conducted by World Vision Afghanistan, adults and children highlighted that poor diets result not only from scarcity but also from harmful household norms and limited nutrition awareness, with women and mothers often eating last and least. As droughts and floods intensify, families are increasingly unable to grow or purchase sufficient food, contributing directly to rising malnutrition. Climate pressures are also accelerating displacement, with nearly [400,000 people](#) forced to move in early 2025 alone – further disrupting access to food, safe water, health services, and stable caregiving. This is additional to the over two million Afghans who have returned from Iran this year, often to food insecure localities. Meanwhile, endemic

poverty, limited employment opportunities, and significant reductions in food security funding risk deepening the crisis even further.



Iraq is experiencing one of its most severe droughts in decades, compounding an already fragile humanitarian and economic landscape.

More than one million people remain internally displaced, including [168,000 uprooted by climate-related shocks](#). The country has endured a [multi-year hydrological drought since 2020](#), which is expected to persist into 2026, with water reserves falling from 60 billion to 10 billion cubic metres due to poor rainfall, upstream damming, and inefficient water management. [Food security is projected to deteriorate](#) as government restrictions on planting, driven by extremely low water levels, result in below-average wheat and barley harvests. If these constraints continue, thousands of farming households risk losing their primary source of income, potentially triggering [increased rural-to-urban migration](#) as families seek alternative livelihoods. Children's vulnerability will deepen as they continue to [lack access to clean water](#), and school disruptions may push the number of out-of-school children even higher. [Our climate research](#) has shown that children in Iraq experience high levels of psychological distress due to the impacts of climate change – including anxiety, sadness, and guilt.



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Jordan is one of the [most water-scarce countries in the world](#) with annual renewable water resources below 100 cubic meters (m³) per person, far below the

500 m³ scarcity threshold. The host country faces chronic shortages that heighten food-security risks for poor urban households and refugee families, many of whom depend on costly water purchases. These pressures are compounded by broader environmental challenges that undermine both the economy and public wellbeing. With scarce natural resources, [Jordan relies heavily on imports of water](#), energy and other essential materials, making it particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. According to UNHCR's 2024 Vulnerability Assessment Framework (VAF), [around 40% of refugees in Jordan](#) are vulnerable to climate change, citing exposure to extreme weather such as heatwaves, storms, and rain damage. According to WFP, close to [75% of Syrian refugees in Jordan experienced food insecurity in 2025](#), while the current WFP budget can assist only a portion of them, leaving tens of thousands at risk. Our [climate research](#) has also shown that Syrian refugee children in Jordan are particularly vulnerable to extreme heat, drought, and water shortages. These conditions disrupt school attendance, increase mental health distress, and heighten exposure to violence – including at water collection points – with girls facing serious protection risks such as early marriage. Without urgent action to address climate-related pressures on water, food, and livelihoods, vulnerable children and households in Jordan will face escalating risks to their health, protection, and long-term wellbeing.



Lebanon is facing its [most severe drought on record](#), rainfall levels have fallen by more than 50% across much of the country, with reduced snow accumulation and earlier melt. More than 1.85 million

people now live in areas [highly vulnerable to drought](#), while more than 44% of the population relies on expensive and often unsafe water trucking. Food security is undermined by [collapsing agricultural output](#); public health is at risk of waterborne disease outbreaks; energy production is constrained by diminished hydropower; and social stability is threatened as water becomes a contested resource in communities already strained by displacement

and economic crisis. Despite the November 2024 ceasefire, about 1.17 million Lebanese residents, as well as Syrian and Palestinian refugees, kept experiencing [high levels of acute food insecurity](#) (IPC Phase 3 or above) in 2025. In addition, more than [94% of the adolescents](#) we surveyed in 2025 reported that conflict and insecurity make it harder for their families to secure enough food. As drought intensifies in Lebanon, water is increasingly becoming [a contested resource](#) between communities, heightening inter-communal tensions over scarce water and food supplies. Children growing up in underserved areas such as Akkar [reported anxiety, sadness, and fear](#) linked to water insecurity, food scarcity, and disrupted schooling. They also face increased risk of verbal and physical abuse, particularly around water collection, with girls disproportionately affected.



In **Syria**, [food security has sharply deteriorated](#) as climate-related shocks intensify, with cereal production in 2025 estimated at 60% below the five-year average due to

severe drought, prolonged high temperatures, and decreasing rainfall. Climate-induced drought, combined with domestic unrest and deepening economic instability, has drastically reduced access to nutritious food for vulnerable





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children and families. An estimated [14,565,154 people need food security support](#) with average severity level of 3 across Syria. Low-income households, internally displaced people, and communities in conflict-affected areas are [hardest hit](#), facing soaring living costs, collapsing purchasing power, and diminishing livelihood options. World Vision Syria Response's [October 2025 Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment](#) indicates that drought conditions are most severe in northern areas such as Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn in Hasakah Governorate, while water scarcity is widespread in northern Syria, driven by low rainfall, reduced Euphrates River flow, and damaged water infrastructure. These pressures are limiting access to drinking water and heightening the risks of waterborne diseases among already vulnerable and food insecure children and families. Syria's WASH sector also faces major gaps, with many households lacking safe and reliable water and sanitation. Irregular supply, high costs, and weak infrastructure force reliance on unsafe alternatives, while women, girls, older people, and persons with disabilities face limited hygiene access. Our [climate research shows](#) that children in northern Syria are exposed to overlapping risks from poverty, food insecurity, climate-related illness, and disrupted education, while water and food shortages heighten family tensions and increase exposure to gender-based violence, early marriage, and other protection concerns such as child labour.



In the **West Bank**, restrictive policies limiting access to agricultural lands, attacks on water and food systems, protection risks, movement restrictions, damaged infrastructure, and a deepening economic crisis are [increasing the risk of hunger](#) and child malnutrition in already fragile communities. Children and families facing acute protection crises are exposed to the combined pressures of climate change, drought, and food insecurity. Water scarcity, land degradation, demolitions, and restricted movement are [undermining agricultural livelihoods](#), reducing access to nutritious food, and forcing households to adopt crisis coping strategies. Our [climate research](#) has shown that children in the West Bank already face heightened health risks due to extreme heat and water scarcity, including respiratory illnesses. Children also reported significant emotional distress, including anxiety, sadness, and fear of climate-induced displacement. Families in the [most affected areas](#) are bearing the brunt of this crisis, experiencing skipped meals, worsening mental health, and impacts on safety, education, health, and child development. According to [World Vision's Multi-sectoral Needs Assessment in the West Bank](#), one in four families have reported behavioural changes in children linked to fear, anxiety or trauma.

III. World Vision MEER's Environmental Stewardship and Climate Action Response

[World Vision's Environmental Stewardship and Climate Action \(ESCA\) work](#) in the Middle East and Eastern Europe Region prioritises large-scale landscape restoration that enables communities to adapt to climate shocks, including prolonged drought. In partnership with affected farmers, families, children, and young people, the approach supports resilient livelihoods through farmer-managed natural regeneration, improved soil and water management, and community-led re-greening efforts. Anchored in a commitment to long-term resilience, we advance integrated measures that enhance water-resource management, strengthen agricultural systems, and establish early warning mechanisms across drought-affected areas.



Water Systems and Water Resource Management:

World Vision is strengthening water systems in drought-affected regions to secure sustainable and equitable access to water. We are restoring watersheds using earth and stone structures – such as check dams, bunds, and swales – to increase water retention, recharge groundwater, and improve year-round availability. In Jordan, we are conducting a feasibility study to determine the optimal location for the region's first large-scale groundwater dam, expected to replenish millions of litres annually. We are also improving overland water management, rehabilitating water networks to reduce losses, and enhancing storage and efficiency across communities. Our investments in wastewater treatment and resource recovery contribute directly to local resilience. In parallel, we are strengthening integrated water resource management systems to ensure water is managed responsibly for all users.



Agriculture and Livelihood Diversification:

World Vision MEER is strengthening agricultural resilience by promoting climate-smart technologies, including drip and trickle irrigation, drought-tolerant seeds and livestock, and training in agroecological and conservation agriculture practices. We support farmers to adopt on-site water, soil, and nutrient conservation and to use data-informed decision-making tools, ensuring that smallholders can maximise productivity and resource efficiency. We also equip households with financial literacy, savings groups, and insurance products to help cushion the economic impacts of drought. To reduce reliance on agriculture alone, we assist families to diversify their livelihoods and establish alternative income sources, ensuring that shocks such as drought or crop failure do not push them into crisis.



Early Warning Systems:

World Vision MEER is supporting communities and municipalities to adopt early warning systems for hazards such as drought. In Iraq, the establishment of drought early warning systems enables communities to take timely and strategic action – such as securing emergency fodder or engaging in destocking and restocking programmes – to safeguard crops, livestock, and livelihoods before conditions deteriorate. By translating climate and market information into clear, actionable advisories, these systems help households and local institutions make informed, protective decisions in advance, rather than responding only after losses have occurred.

World Vision is responding to severe drought across affected countries through integrated, resilience-focused interventions that complement ongoing programming in the Middle East and Afghanistan:

In Lebanon, World Vision is ensuring sustainable access to water through rehabilitation and installation of water infrastructure and solarisation of power sources, accessible to both local communities and refugees. We are also supporting drought affected farmers with capacity building on water conservation practices, drip irrigation systems, and conditional cash assistance that encourage sustainable agriculture.

In Syria, World Vision's efforts focus on sustainable, solar-powered water networks, community-led management, cost-recovery models, efficient water use, and inclusive WASH services to ensure reliable access for drought-affected and disabled populations.

In Afghanistan, support includes unconditional and conditional cash assistance to meet basic needs while rehabilitating irrigation systems, constructing water-harvesting structures, and promoting climate-smart agriculture and promoting Community Based Disaster Risk Management in vulnerable villages.



In Jordan, World Vision is conducting a feasibility study to determine the optimal location for the region's first large-scale groundwater dam, expected to replenish millions of litres annually. We are also improving overland water management, rehabilitating water networks to reduce losses, and enhancing storage and efficiency across communities.

In the West Bank, World Vision is responding by helping families and farmers navigate severe water access and use restrictions with innovations such as smart water meters and climate-smart agricultural practices that utilise less water for irrigation.

In Iraq, World Vision works with government partners to strengthen climate resilience through greening initiatives, conservation farming training, renewable energy applications, and upgraded water systems using digital monitoring and improved purification.

World Vision Afghanistan delivers an integrated drought response that protects vulnerable households, stabilises livelihoods, and builds long-term resilience. Support includes unconditional and conditional cash assistance to meet basic needs and rehabilitate irrigation systems, such as canals, check dams, and water-harvesting points, improving water availability for crops and livestock. Climate-smart agriculture practices, drought-resistant seeds, veterinary services, and emergency fodder help sustain food production and protect key livelihood assets. Households are also supported to diversify income through small off-farm enterprises, while environmental rehabilitation, tree planting, and solar stoves promote sustainable resource management. Together, these measures address immediate needs and strengthen community capacity to withstand recurring droughts.

World Vision Afghanistan provided [certified seeds to 800 farmers](#), funded by the Dutch Relief Alliance, enough to sow two jeribs, alongside fertiliser that boosts early crop growth, strengthens plants and increases yield.

“If not for the certified seeds, I would have had no harvest at all,” says Mohammad. “I couldn’t afford them. In this season of drought, it is impossible to cultivate and get any yield without certified seeds. We have the land. What we need are good seeds to make sure that when we plant, we can harvest. But we cannot afford them.”

World Vision Iraq (WV Iraq) is strengthening climate resilience and environmental sustainability through a range of integrated initiatives. Working with the Directorates of Agriculture, municipalities and relevant ministries, efforts focus on expanding green zones by leading greening activities – such as tree-planting in schools and public parks – with further nature-based solutions to follow pending a feasibility study on options including rainwater harvesting and artificial ponds. Support to farmers and agricultural graduates includes capacity-building in conservation farming, climate-smart and sustainable agriculture, agroecology, renewable energy applications, water-saving techniques, composting, and efficient water and energy practices. To address growing water scarcity, and in partnership with the Directorate of Water, WV Iraq is also rehabilitating and upgrading water distribution systems through digitalised water release, improved monitoring technologies, strengthened chlorination and purification processes, and enhanced water-quality testing to improve both supply and safety.

World Vision Iraq is [strengthening climate resilience](#) by expanding green spaces, promoting climate-smart agriculture, and improving safe water access in drought-affected communities alongside government partners.

“Today, I planted a tree and I am so happy about it. I will take care of it from now until I grow up. These days, the weather is very hot and we can’t play the way we want... But planting trees gives us hope.” — Ruqaya, student participating in World Vision’s Nexus Accelerator Fund initiative, funded by multiple Support Offices and supervised by World Vision Canada

World Vision's Syria Response (WVSR) is addressing worsening drought in Jordan and Syria through a focus on sustainable water systems, community-led management, and climate-resilient, inclusive WASH services. This includes rehabilitating and expanding water networks and stations, constructing elevated storage tanks, while also increasing the use of solar energy to provide more reliable and cost-efficient water supply amid recurrent drought conditions. Sustainable management models have also been introduced, combining cost-recovery mechanisms for water stations with strengthened local WASH committees to oversee operation and maintenance of scarce water resources, alongside efforts to promote efficient water use and conservation in agriculture-dependent communities. In addition, climate-resilient design – such as solarisation, the use of durable materials, and environmentally sound wastewater and solid waste management – is integrated across interventions in drought-affected areas. WVSR's disability-inclusive WASH interventions also ensure that people with disabilities in camps have safe, dignified access to essential water and sanitation services. In

At school in northwest Syria, 14-year-old Yousef noticed something that deeply troubled him: some students were leaving the tap running after washing their hands, wasting precious water. To many, it might have seemed like a minor oversight. But for Yousef, it was a serious warning sign. Determined to make a difference, he launched an awareness campaign at his school to highlight the urgent issue of water scarcity and encourage his peers to save every drop. [Risk Reduction Project in northwest Syria](#) funded by World Vision UK.

“Every drop of water is life itself,” says Yousef, a 14-year-old from a village in northwest Syria.

Jordan, WVSR is conducting a feasibility study to determine the optimal location for the region's first large-scale groundwater dam, expected to replenish millions of litres annually.

World Vision Lebanon (WVL) is a leading partner in addressing drought-related water scarcity, working closely with the Government of Lebanon and communities across the country to ensure sustainable access to water. Interventions include solar-powered water systems, network extensions, installation of pipelines, communal water points for host communities and newly displaced refugees, rehabilitation of wells to optimise existing resources, and replacement of chlorination units to improve water quality. WVL plays a central role in national coordination as WASH sector co-lead and core group member, collaborating closely with Water Establishments and the Ministry of Energy and Water. This engagement ensures that WVL's programmes are fully aligned with national sector strategies and effectively respond to emerging needs. WVL is also a core group member of the Food Security and Agriculture Sector, collaborating closely with the Ministry of Agriculture to enhance agricultural sustainability.

With the support of World Vision Taiwan, [families in Lebanon are receiving](#) clean potable water to meet the sector recommendation of a minimum 20 LPC/D in the refugee settlements of Ferzol, Bekaa.

“We are in dire need of projects like this in this hard situation, and World Vision has supplied the solar panels that are able to help everyone. In the summer heat, the water is available once every two days but would be available every day in the winter,” shares Ahmad Nasser El Moussawi, the Mayor of Mesa with a population of 9,000 residing people including Lebanese and Syrian Refugees.

World Vision's ESCA programme in the West Bank integrates climate change mitigation and adaptation to strengthen the resilience of children, families, and communities. It enhances knowledge, practices, and attitudes on climate and environmental protection, particularly through schools and community groups, and supports the formation of Green Committees that lead local initiatives such as recycling, water conservation, renewable energy use, and the creation of safe green spaces. Alongside child- and gender-sensitive awareness campaigns, the programme promotes climate-smart agriculture through improved irrigation, composting, soil conservation, and effective rainwater management. Working in partnership with local NGOs, government bodies, communities, and donors, these efforts ensure that climate action is embedded within long-term development and contributes to a more sustainable and resilient West Bank.

World Vision, in partnership with Ma'an Development Centre and with funding from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), is implementing the [Green Palestine project](#). The initiative aims to enhance the resilience of 40 communities in the face of climate change and environmental risks.

"With the worsening of the issues such as food insecurity, our role as young people to find solution toward climate change adaptation becomes even more important". Bushra, 20-year-old, member of a local Green Committee supported by World Vision in the West Bank.



To help vulnerable children and families in the Middle East and Afghanistan withstand the devastating impacts of climate shocks and droughts, donors, development agencies, and government stakeholders must work together to:



Invest in climate-adaptation funding and programming to enhance food and water security for millions of children and their families in the Middle East and Afghanistan:

Many parents across the Middle East and Afghanistan are watching their crops fail and water sources disappear, leaving them unable to feed their children or sustain their agricultural lands. To address this growing crisis, governments and donors must urgently increase investment in measures that reduce drought vulnerability, including the rehabilitation of watersheds and water networks, and the expansion of wastewater reuse.

Strengthening integrated water management and governance systems, scaling up climate-smart agricultural practices, and establishing drought-responsive early warning systems are essential to securing sustainable outcomes for the families and children we serve. These interventions are not a luxury – they are lifelines for millions striving to survive in an increasingly hostile climate.



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Place vulnerable children and young people at the heart of climate action and policies:

Children across the Middle East and Afghanistan are bearing the brunt the climate crisis every single day. They are missing out on school because of floods and heatwaves, suffering from anxiety about their future, and struggling to access the basics needed to grow and thrive. Climate strategies and emergency responses must be designed around their needs, voices and rights. This means protecting schooling during climate shocks, ensuring safe water and nutrition in drought-hit areas, providing mental-health support tailored to children, young people, and parents' needs, as well as giving younger generations the chance to shape the decisions and climate actions that will define the world they inherit.



Strengthen support for livelihoods and create real pathways to sustainable, environmentally friendly, and dignified work opportunities:

As lands dry and harvests shrink, many families across the Middle East and Afghanistan are losing the income they have depended on for generations. Children and young people in particular are watching opportunities disappear and fearing for their future. Governments and development partners need to help farmers and their families adapt and diversify their sources of income. By investing in green work opportunities and sustainable livelihoods, we can give families, children, and young people a chance to rebuild their futures with dignity. Such support must be targeted, long-term, and designed to ensure that no vulnerable household is left behind as economic conditions and food security continue to worsen due to climate shocks.



Restore and scale up humanitarian and development/nexus funding to protect families, children, and young people impacted by drought and the worsening food security:

Across the region, parents are making impossible choices – skipping meals so their children can eat, pulling children out of school make ends meet, or leaving their homes in search of water, food, and better opportunities.

Cuts to humanitarian and development/nexus programming across the Middle East and Afghanistan – in particular climate action, health and nutrition, WASH, child protection and MHPSS programmes – are leaving families more exposed than ever. Donors must urgently restore and expand funding to humanitarian and development/nexus responses across the

region – with a focus on sustainable, green initiatives – so that children and their caregivers can receive the help they need to thrive. Without this support, hunger will rise, health outcomes will deteriorate, and more families will be forced to uproot their lives in search of safety and survival elsewhere.



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