BROKEN SYSTEMS, EMPTY PLATES IN A WORLD OF PLENTY

How conflict, climate change, and systemic failures are fuelling poor nutrition and hunger

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This advocacy briefing draws on qualitative and participatory evidence from Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, and the West Bank grounded in the lived experiences of children, adolescents, caregivers, and communities, and informed by World Vision research conducted between 2024 and 2025. Through child-led and participatory research, Nutrition Dialogues, and contextual analysis, the briefing captures how children, families and communities experience hunger and poor nutrition in everyday life — not only as a lack of food, but as a challenge that affects health, learning, wellbeing, and dignity.

By examining these experiences side by side, the policy paper identifies clear commonalities, while also highlighting important differences in how hunger and poor nutrition are experienced. Across all contexts, children and communities describe similar pressures — rising food prices, declining incomes, weakened public services, and repeated shocks — even as these factors are shaped by distinct political, economic, and environmental realities.

Most consistently, the briefing shows that food affordability — rather than food availability — is the factor impacting hunger and children and adolescents' diets. Food may be present in markets or communities, but nutritious options are increasingly out of reach as prices rise,

livelihoods are disrupted, and support systems are strained. Children and caregivers describe being forced to prioritise filling but low-nutrient foods, reduce dietary diversity, and make difficult trade-offs that affect physical health, emotional wellbeing, and children's ability to learn. These challenges are compounded by climate shocks, conflict, and economic instability, further limiting families' capacity to provide nutritious diets for their children.

Children's experiences also highlight how hunger is closely interconnected with mental health, education, gender inequality, and protection risks. Hunger contributes to stress, shame, and anxiety; disrupts school attendance and engagement; reinforces harmful gender norms; and increases reliance on negative coping strategies, including child labour. While communities often mobilise to support one another, children and caregivers emphasise that these efforts cannot replace reliable systems and services.

The briefing therefore calls for urgent, integrated, and gender-transformative action that strengthens food affordability, improves the quality and reach of school meals, supports children's mental health and learning, addresses harmful social norms, and embeds nutrition across health, education, social protection, and child protection systems — so that all children can survive and thrive.

ABOUT THIS BRIEFING

This advocacy briefing brings together findings from qualitative, participatory, and contextual evidence from Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, and the West Bank. The analysis synthesises primary sources, including Nutrition Dialogues, ENOUGH Campaign studies, multisector needs assessments, hunger and price shock studies, and thematic reports produced by World Vision between 2024 and 2025. While the political, economic, and social contexts examined in this briefing differ across contexts, children's and communities' experiences of hunger and poor nutrition reveal clear common patterns alongside important differences.

Taken together, these findings challenge the idea that hunger is simply about a lack of food. Built around the voices and lived experiences of children, caregivers, and communities, this briefing shows that hunger is caused by broken systems, unaffordable food, and the everyday pressures families face when support fails. Children's stories make clear that hunger affects far more than what they eat — shaping how they feel, learn, and experience dignity — and point to the urgent need for action that restores affordability, support, and wellbeing for children.

What are the Nutrition Dialogues?

Nutrition Dialogues is a global community engagement initiative launched in 2024 by World Vision in partnership with the 4SD Foundation. It brings the voices of people most affected by food insecurity and poor nutrition into decision-making at local, national, and global levels. To date, more than 10,000 children, caregivers and community members across 54 countries have participated in dialogues at community and district level, sharing lived experiences and identifying locally relevant solutions.

Nutrition Dialogues provide a participatory, evidence-informed foundation for advocacy, ensuring that policy recommendations reflect community-identified priorities and are people-centred, context-responsive, and actionable — particularly for women, children, and marginalised groups whose voices are often missing from nutrition decision-making.

Finding #1: Hunger and poor nutrition results from broken systems and relationships, not only by food scarcity

Across all contexts, children and caregivers describe hunger as the outcome of systems that no longer function as intended, even though the nature of those system failures varies. Children and community members describe how hunger and poor nutrition result from interconnected system failures - collapsed livelihoods, inaccessible labour markets, unaffordable food, weakened public services, environmental stress, and fractured relationships between households, communities, and institutions. Families are not simply lacking food; they are trying to survive in environments where prices are rising, incomes are shrinking, and the systems meant to support access to nutritious food systems no longer function.

- In **Afghanistan**, fractured relationships between households, food systems and external actors, and within households themselves undermine good nutrition and food security. While agricultural production continues in many areas, economic collapse, climate shocks, and lack of cash force families to sell nutrient-rich foods immediately to meet urgent needs, breaking the link between what is produced and what is consumed at household level. Humanitarian assistance systems also compound strained relationships between communities and aid agencies

and donors. Support is perceived as insufficient, irregular, or poorly aligned with household needs. Within households, social and cultural norms further influence access to good nutrition, with women and girls in particular, primarily impacted. Together, these dynamics show how both food systems and household decision-making are breaking down, undermining diet quality and child nutrition even where food is physically present.

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, a post-conflict, middle-income context, lack of access to nutritious food manifests through institutional fragmentation and weak coordination. While food availability is generally stable and markets function, poor nutrition and hunger persist because social protection, health, education, and agricultural systems operate in silos, limiting households' ability to access consistent, preventive support. The evidence highlights gaps in nutrition education, the impacts of hidden poverty, uneven access to services between rural and urban areas, and weak links between small-scale producers and markets — all of which constrain livelihoods and diet quality.

- In **Lebanon**, the combined effects of conflict, economic collapse, and the fragmentation of systems that should enable access to nutritious food, including markets, farming systems, public services, social protection, vital infrastructure, and governance, are perpetuating hunger and poor nutrition. Ongoing conflict has disrupted livelihoods and markets, while prolonged economic decline, hyperinflation, and political paralysis have severed the link between work, income, and food affordability, leaving families unable to sustain adequate diets despite food being available. Conflict and insecurity continue to undermine household food access, with more than 94% of adolescents surveyed for a 2025 World Vision study reporting that these conditions make it harder for their families to secure enough food. Lebanon's food crisis is compounded by the breakdown of the education system, leaving many children unable to learn, concentrate, or remain enrolled.

- In the **West Bank**, lack of food is the result of the deliberate dismantling of the systems and relationships that sustain life, rather than food scarcity. Restrictions on movement, land, water, employment, and fiscal resources have systematically severed relationships between households and livelihoods, farmers and land, and communities and services. Although food remains available in markets, widespread income collapse and access denial mean families cannot afford nutritious diets, while damage to infrastructure and constraints on public systems weaken institutional capacity to protect children and caregivers.

Finding #2: Food Affordability is the primary driver of poor diets

Children and caregivers across contexts consistently describe food affordability — rather than food availability — as the decisive factor shaping what families eat. Food is often present in markets or produced locally, but rising prices, falling incomes, and weak support systems mean that nutritious diets are increasingly out of reach. Families describe being forced to prioritise filling foods over healthy ones, cutting back on fresh and protein-rich foods, and making daily trade-offs that affect children's health, learning, and wellbeing. While the forces driving unaffordability differ by context, the lived experience for families is strikingly similar.

- In **Afghanistan**, the loss of livelihoods, widespread unemployment, and chronic poverty hit families hardest. Household purchasing power is severely constrained, forcing families to sell nutritious foods they produce in order to afford cheaper staples, and prioritising food quantity over quality, resulting in increasingly poor diets. Other negative coping strategies such as child labour and school dropouts further amplify children's exposure to hunger – and magnify protection risks.

> *"We had no flour, not even dry bread. My mother asked my father, but he had no money. Finally, he went out to borrow two pieces of bread."* (13-year-old girl, Nutrition Dialogue, Afghanistan)

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, rising food prices and living costs increasingly outpace wages and social protection, particularly affecting low-income households. Families describe adjusting diets by reducing the quality and variety of food, even when food remains available in shops. Children report that these changes affect not only what they eat, but how they participate in school and social life.
- In **Lebanon**, hyperinflation, currency collapse, and rising living costs have rapidly eroded purchasing power. Households are being forced to reduce both the quantity and quality of food consumed, shifting away from diverse diets despite continued food availability. Financial hardship is also contributing to children leaving school, despite school meals being a critical — and for some children the most reliable albeit often limited — source of daily food.

- In the **West Bank**, particularly since October 2023, large-scale job losses following the cancellation of work permits and the wider economic crisis have sharply reduced household incomes, forcing families to cut food consumption and dietary diversity, even as markets remain supplied. As purchasing power has eroded, most households buy less food and cut back on dietary diversity, with reductions in meat, dairy, and fresh produce consumption becoming common coping strategies. A 2025 World Vision study found that 95% of households surveyed cited lack of money as the main reason for not having enough food.

> *"I can see every day how difficult economic conditions impact families' ability to secure basic needs."* (Nersyan, 16 years old, West Bank)

Finding #3: Climate change and environmental degradation act as risk multipliers for food insecurity and poor nutrition

Across the four settings, children describe climate change and environmental pressures as forces that make hunger and poor nutrition worse, rather than isolated problems on their own. Climate-related shocks disrupt livelihoods, markets and critical systems (e.g. water), raise food prices, and trigger displacement. Environmental harm such as air and land pollution and rubble also affect food production and systems. While the nature of these pressures varies by context, children consistently describe how environmental stress deepens food insecurity and undermines families' ability to secure nutritious diets.

- In **Afghanistan**, climate shocks have undermined livelihoods and food security over time, creating sustained risks to children's nutrition and wellbeing, especially when combined with poverty and conflict. Prolonged droughts, water scarcity, and environmental degradation have severely affected agriculture and rural livelihoods, reducing food production and income at household level. Climate-related displacement has surged, with hundreds of thousands of people forced to move, further disrupting access to food, water, health services, and stable caregiving environments.

❝ *"We have lost all the things that we had, even now we don't have food to eat. We go hungry many times. I was breastfeeding [at the time of the floods] and my child got malnutrition and I myself got sick."* (Displaced woman, Ghor, Afghanistan).

- In **Lebanon**, environmental pressure interacts with economic collapse and weak infrastructure. Water shortages, pollution and conflict-related soil contamination, fragile infrastructure, and overstretched public services increase health risks and household costs, undermine food quality and availability, and intensify the daily struggle to afford food—particularly fresh and nutritious items.

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, climate variability, including floods and extreme weather events, has disrupted agricultural production and local food systems. Industrial activity and mining have contributed to land and environmental pollution, undermining the quality of agricultural land and eroding trust in locally produced food. As a result, households report uncertainty about the safety and nutritional value of food grown in polluted areas, which can discourage consumption of local produce and reduce dietary diversity.

❝ *"The local coal industry pollutes air and land."* (Child Nutrition Workshop participant, Banovići, Bosnia and Herzegovina)

- In the **West Bank**, environmental pressures are closely linked to political and structural constraints on land and water access. Restrictions on agricultural land, damage to infrastructure, and limited control over water resources severely undermine food production and pastoral livelihoods. Environmental stress does not occur independently, but is mediated through restrictions that prevent communities from adapting, amplifying the nutrition impacts of climate variability and land degradation.

Spotlight: The mental health impacts of food insecurity and hunger on children and adolescents

Children and adolescents describe hunger not only as a physical experience, but as a constant psychological burden that shapes how they feel, behave, and relate to others. Across World Vision's research, children and young people describe how uncertainty about food — whether food will be available, affordable, or sufficient — creates chronic stress, anxiety, and emotional distress. In Lebanon, worries about when or whether the next meal will come weigh heavily on children's minds, becoming a persistent background stress rather than a short-term shock.

This psychological strain shows up clearly in children's behaviour. Children experiencing food insecurity report social withdrawal, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and disengagement from school and social life. Parents and caregivers also describe noticeable changes, including children becoming quieter, more anxious, aggressive, or losing motivation. In Lebanon, a 2025 World Vision study found that more than four in five vulnerable adolescents reported feeling anxious or unhappy due to worries about food, with hunger widely described as *persistent and wearing*, rather than occasional. In the West Bank, over one in four families that took part in a research have noticed behavioural changes in children linked to fear, anxiety, or trauma amid worsening food insecurity and economic collapse; nearly one in ten report that their child's mental health has deteriorated. Children are becoming more withdrawn, anxious, and aggressive — yet mental health support is almost entirely unavailable. Psychological stress and trauma are also both drivers and consequences of poor nutrition, resulting in Bosnia and Herzegovina for example in disrupted eating behaviours, including appetite suppression and emotional eating, which in turn affect nutritional wellbeing.

Shame and stigma are often hidden but deeply damaging aspects of the mental health impact of hunger. Children and adolescents say they withdraw from peers or avoid school when they lack food, especially where food sharing is visible, leaving them feeling embarrassed and excluded. In Lebanon, young people describe distancing themselves from friends out of shame, and to avoid social situations involving food they cannot afford or reciprocate. In the West Bank, food scarcity can increase tension and conflict, placing additional emotional strain on children, who may take on adult responsibilities or hide their own needs to protect others.

"Because of the war, my father became unemployed, and our house is still destroyed. We are carrying this burden of the approaching winter. During the war, we went to my aunt's house, but because our families are large, we were ashamed and embarrassed by hunger."(Lebanese adolescent girl)

The mental health impacts of hunger are made worse by disrupted education and weak access to psychosocial support. Children explain that hunger affects their ability to concentrate, attend school regularly, and engage in learning, while stress and anxiety linked to food insecurity can push them further away from school or into dropout. At the same time, mental health and psychosocial services are often limited or inaccessible in the very contexts where food insecurity is most severe, leaving children to cope with distress largely unsupported.

These experiences highlight that the mental health and stigma-related impacts of hunger are often overlooked in food security and nutrition responses. Yet for children, they are central to how hunger affects wellbeing, learning, and dignity, underscoring the need to integrate psychosocial support into food and nutrition programming.

Finding #4: Nutrition knowledge gaps reduce diet quality and undermine good nutrition

Children and caregivers in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Lebanon specifically, emphasise that gaps in nutrition knowledge make it harder to maintain healthy diets, particularly under conditions of poverty and food insecurity. Through the Nutrition Dialogues, children and community members describe how many households lack clear, reliable information on dietary diversity, child feeding practices, food preparation, and the nutritional needs of different age groups. As a result, families struggle to make nourishing choices even when food is available. These knowledge gaps interact with poverty and food insecurity, undermining children's physical health, emotional wellbeing, and ability to learn.

- In **Afghanistan**, limited nutrition knowledge is particularly pronounced. Even when households produce milk, yoghurt, vegetables, or oil, nutritious foods are frequently sold rather than consumed because families lack awareness of their nutritional value or do not know how to prepare them in ways that children will eat. Gaps in knowledge around cooking vegetables, infant and young child feeding, and maternal nutrition - particularly in rural and displaced communities – further affect access to good nutrition.

> *"In our village, we have a lot of vegetables, but many families prefer unhealthy snacks because they don't know how to cook the vegetables properly."* (Adolescent girl, Herat Province — Afghanistan)

- In **Lebanon**, families report lack of basic awareness of healthy diets. Children and caregivers also describe uncertainty about how to prioritise nutrition when affordable foods are often highly processed.

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, gaps in understanding around dietary diversity and food quality, combined with rising living costs and time constraints, affect everyday food choices and contribute to less balanced diets among low-income households.

Knowledge and skills gaps are further exacerbated by changes in lifestyles, economic stress and time constraints. While across contexts, traditional food cultures have not disappeared, some households move away from home-cooked, diverse meals toward convenient, calorie-dense, and ultra-processed foods, even where these are culturally viewed as inferior or undesirable.

Finding #5: Schools are critical nutrition spaces that influence learning and wellbeing

Across contexts, children consistently describe schools as spaces that strongly influence their experience of hunger, wellbeing, and inclusion. Where school-based food, nutrition education, or support is available, schools can help protect children from hunger, reduce stress, and support learning. Where such support is absent or disrupted, children describe schools as places where hunger becomes more visible — affecting concentration, attendance, participation, and dignity.

Children in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular describe schools as one of the most important entry points for improving nutrition. They are clear about what they want from school food: meals that are fresh, healthy, and culturally familiar. They also emphasise that schools can provide more than meals — they are platforms to increase nutrition awareness and develop practical understanding of healthy eating that reflects children and families' daily realities — including how to prepare available foods, how to make nutritious choices within tight budgets, and how to maintain balanced diets under pressure.

- In **Afghanistan**, schools are recognised as being potential platforms not only for learning about nutrition, but accessing food and promoting dietary diversity. Children and adolescents view schools as spaces where children can develop practical understanding of healthy eating, including how to prepare vegetables and combine foods into balanced meals. Restrictions on girls education beyond Grade Six, however, compound a wider exclusion of boys and girls from primary education, driven largely by poverty and gender inequalities.

> *"Schools should hold classes on eating right — this can change our future."*
> *(Boy, 15 years old, Herat Province, Afghanistan)*

- In **Lebanon**, schools play an important role in nutrition education and, where available, school-based nutrition support. Adolescents also highlight the impact of hunger on learning as it affects their concentration and participation in class; this highlights the importance of schools in protecting both learning and nutrition outcomes.

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, schools are less commonly a source of direct food assistance, but children and adolescents expect schools to reinforce healthy eating norms and practical food knowledge, particularly in urban areas. Schools are seen as spaces where nutrition education and, where available, school meals can help counter unhealthy food environments and compensate for the declining transmission of cooking skills at household level.

Schools can function as a critical safety net for children facing hunger — and in some contexts, one of the most reliable places where children can access food on a regular basis. Where household resources are stretched and public systems are weak, schools offer one of the most predictable environments for food support, helping to reduce hunger, support learning, and protect children's dignity.

In **Afghanistan**, when active and resourced, schools can be important settings for meal provision, especially in areas with limited access to health. Evidence shows that school meals are strongly associated with improved attendance and engagement and are widely seen by communities as a reliable source of food for children experiencing household-level food insecurity.

In **Lebanon**, one of the 13 flagship countries where World Vision leads the [School Meals Child-led Research initiative](#) that brings together children from many countries to discuss ways to improve school meals, children see school meals as essential for health, learning, and well-being. Where meals are not provided, children report relying on unhealthy and overpriced snacks from school kiosks or going hungry altogether. The role of schools in reducing stigma is also reported by Lebanese adolescents. School meals help them to "belong", not just to eat, emphasising that eating alongside peers at school supports dignity and social inclusion. They are also seen as an important strategy to "end a whole culture of shame." While there is currently no formal school feeding programme with nation-wide reach, a school feeding programme implemented by the government with the World Food Programme has expanded its coverage from 78,000 students in 2023 to 135,000 students in 2025, including daily in-school snacks in 272 primary public schools, healthy cold meals prepared on- site in 24 school kitchens and catering for an additional 43 nearby schools.

However, nutrition education and access to nutritious school meals are often fragmented, inconsistent, or entirely absent. Gaps in school meal provision and weak regulation of school food environments make it harder for schools to act as reliable nutrition safety nets for children.

- In **Afghanistan**, these gaps are reflected in limited opportunities for children to learn practical nutrition skills, such as preparing vegetables or combining available foods into balanced meals, despite basic awareness of healthy diets. Access to meals in schools remains uneven and dependent on external support, limiting their ability to consistently buffer household food insecurity.

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, structured food education in schools has declined, alongside rising consumption of fast food and sugary products among children, particularly in urban areas.

- In the **West Bank**, consistent school-based meal provision is largely absent despite widespread household food insecurity. In addition, insecurity and economic hardship have led to a sharp decline in school attendance and retention rates, and an increased in child labour. According to a 2025 World Vision survey child labour has increased dramatically, with families sending at least one child to work rising from 1.5% to 7%.

Better practice: "Bread and Tomorrow" programme - an integrated school-centred response to improve child nutrition and well-being in Romania

World Vision Romania's [Bread and Tomorrow Programme](#) supports children to attend school. Children receive a daily hot meal alongside catch-up learning support, as well as practical assistance such as clothing, footwear, stationery, and digital equipment. Tailored psychological support is provided to children who need it, recognising the emotional toll of poverty and exclusion.

The programme also works with those around the child, strengthening the wider support system through teacher training, parental education, and counselling for parents in disadvantaged communities. For children in rural areas, summer camps and excursions offer additional opportunities for learning, social connection, and inclusion beyond the classroom.

This integrated approach resulted in improved school attendance while reducing inequalities between children who can and cannot rely on adequate food at home. The Bread and Tomorrow Programme illustrates how combining food provision with education and family support strengthens both nutrition and learning outcomes, and provides a scalable model for tackling child hunger through coordinated action across education, nutrition, and social systems.

Finding #6: Community mobilisation is a critical buffer to food insecurity and poor nutrition

Research participants across the four contexts describe community mobilisation — through families, neighbours, faith groups, and informal networks — as a vital way of coping with hunger and poor nutrition. When public services are weak or inaccessible, communities often step in to share food, pool resources, and support families facing the greatest hardship. These forms of collective action are often grounded in social norms of solidarity, reciprocity, and care, and are especially visible during acute shocks such as price spikes, and climate events.

- In **Afghanistan**, strong social bonds and local leadership structures shape community mobilisation that plays an important role in food sharing, supporting widows and displaced families, and responding to climate-related shocks. Community groups are often the first responders when crops fail or livelihoods collapse.

- In **Lebanon**, workshop participants reflected on challenges to social cohesion and emphasised the importance of strong relationships within and between communities as a buffer against hunger. Informal support networks, local NGOs, and solidarity-based actions—such as community kitchens—were consistently identified as ways to support access to food, reduce isolation, and sustain mutual support across social divides during periods of prolonged crisis.

- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, community-led support plays a more preventative role, helping to address hidden hunger and social isolation in both urban and rural settings. Community centres, parent networks, and local initiatives are seen as important spaces for raising awareness about nutrition and supporting vulnerable families.

- In the **West Bank**, community mobilisation frequently takes the form

of quiet, informal support rather than visible collective action. Families rely on extended networks and mutual aid to cope with income loss and access restrictions, often sharing food discreetly to avoid stigma.

Yet, while acting as a critical buffer, community-led interventions often exceed capacity and are not sustainable. While informal networks are vital for short-term coping and emotional support, they are not designed to replace formal systems for food security, nutrition, education, or social protection. Repeated crises — including conflict, economic collapse, and climate shocks — are eroding the resilience of communities themselves, leading to fatigue, exclusion, and uneven coverage.

For example, in Afghanistan, repeated crises and chronic poverty have eroded the capacity of community networks, limiting their ability to provide sustained support and increasing reliance on external assistance; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, community initiatives' limited scale and weak linkage to formal systems have constrained their ability to influence structural determinants of nutrition.

Spotlight: Identity influences who goes hungry

Children and families do not experience food insecurity and hunger in the same way. Identities – together with vulnerability factors – shape who goes without, who eats last, and who bears the greatest physical and emotional burden of food insecurity. These intersecting identities and factors influence access to food, services, education, and support — and determine how deeply hunger affects children's lives.

Gender emerges as one of the most consistent drivers of unequal access to good nutrition for children and communities across the four contexts. Women and girls often carry primary responsibility for food preparation and caregiving while having the least access to income, livelihoods opportunities, resources, decision-making spaces. Children describe how girls and women frequently reduce their own food intake to protect others, increasing their risk of malnutrition, stress, and poor health. Across Afghanistan, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, women are commonly the primary caregivers and are expected to manage food scarcity, absorb the stress associated with hunger, and carry the emotional burden of coping with less food. In Afghanistan specifically, ongoing restrictions on girls' education severely limit girls' access to schooling beyond primary level, reducing opportunities to gain nutrition knowledge and benefit from school-based support.

> *"Many mothers prioritise feeding everyone and end up neglecting their own health, thinking it's for the benefit of the family." (Child Nutrition Workshop participant, Ghor Province — Afghanistan)*

> *"Mothers are responsible for food, even when resources are limited." (Community Nutrition Dialogue participant, Bosnia and Herzegovina).*

Additional factors such as household composition, location (rural v. urban areas), displacement status and ethnicity further influences households' risk of food insecurity and poor nutrition and the barriers they face in accessing aid and support.

> *"At school, they gave us light meals and sometimes a bottle of oil. But in the village, they didn't give us anything because we're Syrian." (Adolescent girl, 10–13, Syrian, Balbeek)*

These experiences show that hunger is not neutral, and that who goes hungry is shaped by intersecting identities and vulnerabilities. Too often, food security and nutrition responses overlook how these factors influence access to food and support. Addressing child hunger therefore requires intersectional approaches that recognise and respond to these layered inequalities, ensuring that nutrition efforts reach families and children most at risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data collected by World Vision across Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Lebanon, the West Bank, and the broader Middle East and Eastern Europe region shows that children, families, and communities do not experience hunger and poor nutrition primarily as a lack of food, but as the result of broken systems and weakened relationships — between households and markets, caregivers and institutions, communities and decision-makers — compounded by conflict, climate change, and chronic poverty.

Children, adolescents and community members consistently described how unaffordable food, limited dietary diversity, and the erosion of social and institutional support affect not only what they eat, but their dignity, learning, wellbeing, and sense of belonging. They are also clear that addressing child hunger requires more than expanding food assistance alone. They call for action that restores affordability, strengthens dietary diversity, supports women's and girls' agency, and rebuilds the social and institutional connections — including schools, community networks, and local systems — that enable children and families to thrive.

The following recommendations are informed by the lived realities, experiences, and solutions identified through World Vision's research and Nutrition Dialogues. Across all recommendations, action should be grounded in intersectional, multi-sectoral approaches that recognise how nutrition outcomes are shaped by overlapping factors and require coordinated efforts across sectors and stakeholders.

1. Restore affordability and dietary diversity in ways that address harmful gender norms

National governments, local authorities, donors and operational actors (e.g. INGOs, UN, local organisations) should prioritise food affordability and dietary diversity as core nutrition outcomes, recognising that economic shocks and unaffordable food disproportionately affect women, adolescent girls, and women-headed households, who bear primary responsibility for food preparation and caregiving while having the least access to income and decision-making. Specifically:

- Invest in programmes that challenge and transform harmful social norms affecting food allocation, caregiving, and decision-making within households, while actively engaging men and boys as partners in improving nutrition, alongside efforts to restore livelihoods, strengthen inclusive income opportunities, and expand social protection.

- Expand predictable, shock-responsive cash and voucher assistance that is accessible to women and caregivers, and designed to reduce harmful coping strategies such as women and girls eating last or less.

- Ensure affordability interventions — including social protection and cash-based support — strengthen women's ability to retain and allocate nutritious foods for children and adolescents, rather than being forced to sell them to meet immediate needs.

- Design assistance systems that reduce exclusion linked to gender, displacement status, disability, and location, and other intersecting identities, and strengthen trust, dignity, and relational wellbeing.

2. Institutionalise gender-responsive and inclusive school meals programmes that provide nutritious and diverse diets

National governments, local authorities, and operational actors should strengthen schools as inclusive nutrition and protection platforms, recognising their role in reducing gendered barriers to education, food access, dignity, and safety — particularly for girls. Specifically:

- Standardise minimum dietary standards for nutritious school meals.

- Establish or expand school meal and healthy snack programmes that reduce household food burdens on women and caregivers and support girls' attendance and retention in school.

- Ensure school food programmes actively address stigma and harmful cultural and social norms that may affect boys' and girls' access to nutritious food and protection from associated risks.

- Regulate school food environments to protect children from unhealthy food options.

3. Integrate gender-responsive climate action into nutrition strategies

National governments, local authorities, donors and operational actors should address climate change and environmental degradation as gendered nutrition risk multipliers, recognising that women and girls are often the most affected by water scarcity, livelihood loss, and environmental stress. Specifically:

- Increase investment in climate adaptation and water systems that reduce women's unpaid care burdens, protect household food production, and improve access to safe water for nutrition and caregiving.

- Support climate-resilient, diversified livelihoods for rural and/or displaced women, particularly women-headed households.

- Ensure women, girls, and children's participation in climate, water, and food system decision-making at community levels.

4. Strengthen practical nutrition knowledge and skills while addressing power and time constraints

National governments, local authorities, and operational actors should close nutrition knowledge and skills gaps in ways that recognise gendered time poverty, unequal access to resources, and decision-making power within households. Specifically:

- Invest in practical and tailored nutrition education that is accessible to parents and caregivers, adapted to time, transport, cooking, gender-related and income constraints, and respectful of local food cultures.

- Use schools and community spaces to strengthen intergenerational learning, including for adolescent girls whose education and nutrition are often disrupted in crises.

- Pair accessible and targeted nutrition education with enabling measures (e.g. time-saving solutions) so women can act on knowledge without increasing unpaid labour.

5. Integrate mental health and psychosocial wellbeing with a gender and age lens

National governments, local authorities and operational actors should recognise hunger as both a cause and consequence of mental health and psychological distress, with distinct impacts on women, adolescent girls, and caregivers. Specifically:

- Integrate gender- and age-responsive mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into nutrition, food assistance, and school-based programmes.

- Expand accessible MHPSS for adolescents — particularly girls — who face compounded stress linked to hunger, insecurity, and social expectations.

- Address stigma, shame, and social exclusion associated with hunger as critical dimensions of wellbeing and nutrition.

6. Advance gender-transformative and inclusive nutrition systems

National governments, local authorities, and operational actors should address gender inequality and intersecting identities as structural drivers of food insecurity and poor nutrition. Specifically:

- Prioritise women, children, adolescent girls, displaced populations, persons with disabilities, and low-income households in nutrition actions.

- Strengthen women's economic participation, decision-making power, and leadership in food systems, social protection, and community-led action.

- Actively engage men and boys as partners in improving nutrition, including through programmes that encourage equitable food allocation, shared caregiving, and positive models of masculinity that support women's and girls' health and wellbeing.

- Embed two-way accountability mechanisms that enable women, children, adolescents. and marginalised

groups to influence nutrition decisions and hold systems to account.

- Track and learn from changes in decision-making, and household food allocation — not only nutrition outcomes — to ensure nutrition programmes are delivering meaningful impacts for women and girls.

7. Support community mobilisation strategies that promote inclusion and address gender norms

National governments, local authorities, and operational actors should value community solidarity while recognising that women are often expected to absorb the costs of community coping, increasing fatigue and inequality. Specifically:

- Support community-led initiatives in ways that do not rely disproportionately on women's unpaid labour or informal caregiving.

- Link community mechanisms to formal social protection and public systems, reducing pressure on women and households.

- Institutionalise ongoing dialogue with women, children, and adolescents, ensuring responses reflect diverse lived realities.

8. Adopt integrated, multi-sectoral and intersectional approaches that address the full range of factors shaping children's nutrition and wellbeing.

National governments, local authorities, and operational actors should embed nutrition within health, education, social protection, food systems, and child protection, recognising that children's ability to thrive depends on more than food alone and is influenced by overlapping identities. Specifically:

- Design and deliver nutrition responses that are intersectional and tailored to children most at risk of exclusion, with targeted approaches for girls, adolescents, displaced children, boys and girls with disabilities, and those living in protracted crisis or insecurity.

- Link nutrition interventions with safe schooling, mental health and psychosocial support, and child protection measures to address the stress, stigma, absenteeism, dropout, and harmful coping strategies — including child labour.

- Strengthen coordinated nutrition responses across education, health, social protection, and child protection systems.

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