

Forum: World Health Organization

Issue: Combating child malnourishment in war-torn countries

Student Officer: Maya Braunstein

Position: President

Introduction

It is no coincidence that levels of child malnutrition rise during and following large-scale wars. Property is damaged, funds and resources are reallocated to war efforts, and the physiological needs of citizens— especially those of children— are neglected. A main physiological need of all humans, one that could be detrimental to growth if not provided, is the access to a healthy, nutritious diet. A healthy, rich diet consists of a balanced plate of protein, fruits, vegetables, grains, and dairy. Without a well-rounded diet, children risk malnutrition which can be separated into three different categories: undernutrition, micronutrient-related malnutrition, and obesity. Each of these have their own health effects which can lead to death at an early age. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have been working to combat this issue by providing humanitarian aid to nations in need. Both United Nations groups are working towards the second Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), which aims to end hunger, achieve food security, and improve nutrition.

Although malnutrition persists in both developed and underdeveloped nations with over one in three children around the world being affected by undernutrition, in war-torn countries it is more common to see over half of the children suffer from it. This is because of the heavy reliance on an agriculture economy which is unable to yield a suitable amount of food amidst conflict because of bombings, lack of jobs, mass migration, and many other reasons. Seeing as 70% of the Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) populations rely on agriculture as their main source of income, the destructive nature of war is devastating to the economy and the food sources.

With tens of civil wars and internal conflicts occurring currently, children in these war-torn areas are extremely vulnerable to malnutrition. For example, according to UNICEF, half of the children in Afghanistan under 5 years of age are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition. And in Yemen, almost one third of the population is missing an important part of their diet, whether that is fruits, vegetables, or protein. Among those one third, nearly two and a half million children are in need of treatment for acute malnutrition.

Definition of Key Terms

Malnutrition

Malnutrition, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) “includes undernutrition (wasting, stunting, underweight), inadequate vitamins or minerals, overweight, obesity, and resulting diet-related noncommunicable diseases.” Acute malnutrition occurs when a person obtains a nutritional deficiency from a lack of energy or protein intake. Malnutrition is most often seen in LEDCs, where there is a lack of access to nutrient rich food to citizens. The destructive nature of war in war-torn countries exacerbates the causes of malnutrition. An example of a cause of poverty that spurts from war is poverty. Poverty increases the risks of malnutrition because not only do the impoverished have less access to a healthy diet, they are more vulnerable to harmful illnesses that result from malnutrition which can be too expensive for someone in an LEDC to treat. Although people of all ages suffer from malnourishment, it is most often seen in children under the age of 5, with 45% of child deaths being caused by improper nourishment.

Stunting

Stunting is a result of undernutrition, and is defined by the WHO as “the impaired growth and development that children experience from poor nutrition, repeated infection, and inadequate psychosocial stimulation” (WHO). This often happens because of bad socioeconomic conditions or a lack of nutrients as a newborn and as a young child, both of which are common in war-torn areas. Children who are stunted are typically unable to reach their physical or cognitive potential. Although it is common in bad socioeconomic conditions, it is important to note that being poor alone does not stunt a child's growth. Malnutrition results from not being able to receive proper nutrition, which is more difficult to achieve in poor economic conditions.

Wasting

Wasting, similar to stunting, is a result of undernutrition. Wasting occurs when a child has a low weight, compared to their age. Rather than having recurrent undernutrition (stunting), wasting is caused by recent or severe weight loss. This typically happens due to an infectious disease or not having enough to eat, which are both common in children residing in countries experiencing war. Wasting leaves children with a weak immune system, making them more vulnerable to deadly diseases, many of which are unable to be cured due to tight financial situations or lack of access to proper healthcare. Unfortunately, only one in three children with wasting get treated in time as the importance of preventing wasting is undermined in most nations.

Overweight/obesity

Although malnutrition is often perceived as encompassing people who are underweight, being overweight is another form of improper nutrition. The WHO defines obesity and overweight as, “abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that presents a risk to health.” Although undernutrition is more common in LEDCs than obesity, obesity is becoming more and more common. Healthy foods, fruits, vegetables, and healthy protein are often more expensive than foods that are high in fat or sugar. Because of this, families in war-torn areas are unable to buy and consume foods that are considered healthy, and instead consume foods that are unhealthy. This has been causing an uptick in obesity, especially in children in LEDCs.

War-Torn Nations

War-torn nations are those devastated or wracked by war. Although the last world war ended in 1945, there have been conflicts throughout the world since that time. War often leads to political and economic instability, poverty and malnutrition, and death. The most common current wars are conflicts (international or civil) over land, religion, and resources.

History

One major historical event that caused major malnutrition was the second world war. Because of a decline in nearly all aspects, trade, agriculture, and the economy in general, there was a lack of food and other resources in most nations. With a lack of food, some nations were forced to ration their food supply, meaning each person could only get a certain amount each day. In the United Kingdom, as well as other nations, each citizen was given a booklet with coupons for food and prices were kept stable. However, due to the low supply, people would often wait in line for hours only to go home empty handed, because the food had sold out already. Common foods that were rationed include sugar, coffee, meat, and dairy. Another major issue during World War II was the production of certain foods, specifically bread. With a lack of wheat, other substitutes like corn, barley, and potatoes, were added to bread. In other nations, straw and sand were often mixed in, in order to get a larger amount of food. The lack of health led to major health effects, one major effect being rickets, a bone disease that is most common in children. It causes weak bones, bone deformities, and poor growth.

Since the two World Wars, several other conflicts all around the world have caused malnutrition. Because conflicts cause a decline in the economy, scarcity of food is always an issue. Malnutrition has major effects on children's growth, and anything that causes a decline in access to food can and will cause malnutrition.

Key Issues

Political Instability

One of the major issues in war-torn areas is political instability. Nearly all wars, current and past, are due to a result of unstable politics. For example, the war in Syria is due to anti-government protests and heavy government surveillance. The Syrian government is \ unstable and corrupt, and urgency for change by its people has only led to a long lasting civil war. Also, the war in Afghanistan is between two government groups, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Because of the conflict between these two and an uncertainty of which regime is the legitimate one of Afghanistan, there is political instability which led to the war that is currently being fought. Nearly all wars have something to do with unstable politics, which makes it an essential issue to solve in regards to the issue since war is a major cause of malnutrition in children.

Access to Resources

Access to resources is another major issue that war-torn nations face. Because much of their money is focused on the military, or on other projects such as recovering from the damages caused by war, the main focus is not on ensuring everyone has access to the resources they need (specifically in regards to food). This lack of attention to ensuring people have access to a proper diet leads to malnutrition, which is why it is more common in war torn areas. Other common resources that are not available in war torn areas are shelter, clean water, medical supplies, and sanitation. All of this can also increase the chances of being malnourished or can make being malnourished, more deadly. As the Water and Sanitation Program states, clean water and sanitation directly impact and make infectious diseases worse, such as diarrhea, which is much more common if malnourished. The WHO also states that unsafe water and poor sanitation make malnutrition worse, often having fatal results. Clearly, the lack of access to resources can be detrimental to children in war torn areas.

COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has made matters much worse for children in war-torn areas. Not only do they have to worry about starving and catching diseases from a weakened immune system, the likelihood of catching and not being able to fight off the coronavirus is much more likely. Malnourished children already have a weak immune system, which will make matters worse if they do catch COVID-19. It is also harder to stay safe from COVID because, as stated before, there is a lack of access to resources, including masks, vaccines, and other things that can help stop COVID. COVID-19 has also resulted in an international food shortage, making malnutrition much more common and detrimental.

Resource Allocation

Another issue in war-torn areas is resource allocation, specifically, the allocation to war efforts and not towards the wellbeing of citizens. Resources, such as clean food and water, medical supplies, and money are being sent to war zones, neglecting children who are suffering from malnutrition.. This is a major issue because it decreases the amount of resources and money spent on trying to help malnourished children while further encouraging war.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Syria

Syria is in the midst of a civil war that has been going on for the past 10 years. This war started as a small uprising as people called for reform and stood with pro-democracy protests in other countries in the same region during what is known as the “Arab Spring”. Eventually, this turned into anti-government protests and led to people getting arrested or killed as the government attempted to contain this situation. Two months later, the government began using heavy military weapons and deployed soldiers in the street to control the protests. From there, violence spread, along with the destruction of property. Syria’s economy has taken a serious toll from this conflict as all government spending is going towards funding the military. This has also led thousands into poverty as well as in food shortages across Syria and neighboring states. By June 2021, nearly 60% of the Syrian population were “food insecure” meaning they lacked access to nutritious food. 6.2 million of those people are kids, and the number of malnourished children continues to rise rapidly.

UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund)

The United Nations Children’s Fund is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) that works alongside the United Nations and focuses on providing education and protection, along with food to children in areas that need it. Not only do they deliver food in times of conflict or other emergencies, they also work with local governments to find ways to strengthen health and nutrition systems in that area.

WFP (World Food Program)

The World Food Program is an NGO that supports nations around the globe who struggle with malnutrition. They currently support 115.5 million people across 84 countries in need, along with 17 million children. WFP donates nutritious meals to schools and provides humanitarian aid in the form of food, vouchers, or cash distributions. They focus on emergency areas, specifically areas torn with war, disease, or climate shocks. In war-torn areas, the initiatives conducted by the WFP help children improve

their health, food security, and improve education by encouraging sending children to school. Help from the WFP has provided malnourished children and families with the support they need in a time of crisis and gives children one less thing to worry about on a day to day basis.

Yemen

Yemen has been in a civil war since 2014. The war started between two different groups who both claimed to be the government of Yemen, the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi-led Yemeni government and the Houthi armed movement. According to the World Food Programme (WFP), the war has led to nearly four million people being replaced, and 24 million people in need of assistance. It is estimated that in 2017, 50,000 Yemeni children died due to hunger and hunger related disease. Those numbers have only gotten worse as the war continues. Now, around 2.3 million children are acutely malnourished while 400,000 are severely malnourished. Fortunately, NGOs and UN groups like UNICEF are providing relief for around 3.6 million people, by providing food, water, and other necessary resources for survival.

United States of America

The United States has been involved in many of the current wars, primarily in the Afghanistan conflict. In 2001, the United States invaded Afghanistan in order to support the Afghan government in defeating the Taliban. The main reason for involvement was to find Osama Bin Laden after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York earlier that year. For 20 years, the United States kept troops in Afghanistan. This was justified by the US because they claimed to be trying to prevent the Taliban, a terrorist group, from toppling the current regime. Finally, under the Biden administration, the troops were pulled out of Afghanistan, after they had been fighting the longest war in United States history. With the removal of American troops, the Taliban was able to take over the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan regime. This caused major issues within Afghanistan and around. Because of the destruction that the war has caused, most children in Afghanistan don't have access to food with proper nutrients to be healthy. According to UNICEF, over 40 percent of children are stunted, the highest number in the world. Nearly 10 percent are severely malnourished and lack the development and brain power needed to be healthy. It is unclear as to whether or not the United States involvement made matters worse in Afghanistan, but it is very apparent that the war made malnutrition a major issue in Afghanistan.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

| Date | Description of Event |
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| 1939~1945 | World War II was a war that lasted for 6 years and resulted in global malnutrition. Because of the lack of food that came about with the war, governments were forced to ration food and hand out food stamps. It is |

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| | estimated that 20-25 million people around the world died due to starvation in the six year time period of the war. |
| 1955~1975 | The Vietnam War took place over a twenty year timespan. Seeing as this was a long conflict, malnutrition levels rose, in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries that were affected, significantly during this time and afterwards. Because Vietnam had one of the highest birth rates at the time, infant, child, and maternal malnourishment was the most common. Malnourishment led to other health issues which were often unable to be treated because of a lack of medical resources. |
| 1974 | In 1974, the first World Food Conference was held in Rome, to discuss the issue of food production and consumption. This conference regarded eradicating malnutrition and the ways they planned on doing it. They planned to increase food production in LEDCs, establish policies for improving consumption patterns in those nations, and improving availability of food, specifically for vulnerable groups. |
| 1990~1991 | The Gulf War was a war between Iraq and an allied group of 39 other nations. Because this war involved fighting not just in Iraq, but other countries in the Arabian Gulf, millions of people were affected and experienced malnutrition. In a survey of just Iraqi children and infants, nearly 37% of the children experienced some type of malnutrition. This does not take into account children from neighboring nations. |
| 2000-present | Although the Israel-Palestine Conflict started in 1948, at the end of World War II, malnutrition began to affect large numbers of people starting in the 21st century. As of 2013, one-third of the Palestinian households were food insecure. A large effect of malnutrition in Palestine is anemia because of the lack of nutrient rich, oxygen filled foods. |
| 2001~present | The conflict in Afghanistan is an ongoing conflict that has affected millions of people. Children and women, especially, are relying on nutrition packs given by NGOs such as UNICEF or WFP to get their only source of nutrients. As of December, 2021 more than one million children were at risk of dying in Afghanistan because of malnutrition. With malnutrition causing other diseases and sicknesses, hospitals are full but are unable to treat their patients because of a lack of all resources. |
| 2011~present | The Syrian war has approached its 10 year mark. Currently, there are over half a million kids who suffer from stunting and the number is expected to increase, especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic and an even lower food supply. In some parts of Syria, doctors are diagnosing over 20 children a day with malnutrition and as the end of the war is nowhere in sight, the number will continue to increase. |
| 2012 | In 2012, the Zero Hunger Challenge encouraged all countries to work towards a future where all infants, kids, and adults have access to nutrition and food systems that are resilient. |
| 2014~present | The conflict in Yemen is experiencing its highest level of malnutrition since the beginning of the conflict, especially in kids. So far, 2.3 million kids are malnourished with 400,000 at risk of severe malnutrition. Seeing as the conflict is still going, malnutrition levels are likely not going to improve without a dramatic change or increase in food supply. |
| 2016~2030 | In 2016, the United Nations started the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically, goal two, no hunger. So far, they have reached eight targets, held |

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| | 30 events, and taken 778 actions to end world hunger. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed back the progress originally made and has made the goal of reaching zero hunger, even harder. |
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Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- Resolution 2427, 3 July 2018 (S/RES/2427)
- Children and Armed Conflict, 20 April 2016 (A/70/836–S/2016/360)
- Implementation of the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016-2025), 11 April 2018 (A/72/829)
- Rights of the child, 23 January 2007, (A/RES/61/146)
- World Food Programme, 1961, (A/RES/1714)
- World Food Conference, 5-16 November 1974, (E/CONF.65/20)
- United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, 15 April 2016 (A/RES/70/259)

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Zero Hunger Challenge

The Zero Hunger Challenge was created by the United Nations in 2012 as a way to inspire action within countries. There are five main goals of the Zero Hunger Challenge. One goal is to ensure all food systems are sustainable, from production to consumption. This will ensure that, should there be a conflict, the food systems will not be affected by that. The second goal aims to end rural poverty by increasing the income of small producers. Not only will this eliminate rural hunger, it will also lead to a greater production of agricultural goods. The third goal aims to minimize food waste, from the production process to the transportation process to the consumption process. The fourth goal aims to provide access to enough healthy, nutritious food for all people at all times. The final goal aims to end malnutrition in all of its forms by providing nutritious foods to pregnant women as well as children. While ending malnutrition in all of its forms as well as ensuring all food is sustainably produced is ideal, it is not the most feasible. Although they set a plan to achieve these goals by 2030, unprecedented situations, specifically COVID-19 and new conflicts have pushed back the progress made. However, the international community has still made several strides towards achieving these goals, which should not be overlooked.

Humanitarian Aid by the World Food Program and other NGOs

A very common solution to supporting malnourished children in war-torn areas is through NGOs, most notably, the establishment of and initiatives conducted by World Food Program. However, there are many NGOs working in these areas to provide food for children and others who do not get the proper nutrients they should intake daily. Some of these organizations include Action Against Hunger, UNICEF, and Care. Just the WFP alone supports well over 100 million people across 84 countries in need. 17 million of those people include malnourished children. Similarly, this organization responds specifically to emergencies, including conflicts and war and has thousands of vehicles to ensure that people who are in need of food and other resources get what they need. While this seems like a viable solution because it has been impactful, it is not the best solution because it is not sustainable and it will not support a nation at getting to the origins of an issue, which is important to end conflict. While NGOs have contributed exemplary amounts of aid and resources to children suffering from malnourishment in war-torn areas, we continue to see children suffering. In order to fully combat child malnourishment in wartorn areas, humanitarian aid must be used in combination with other solutions that address the roots of internal conflicts.

Possible Solutions

1. Introducing sustainable, low-scale agriculture in rural communities to make them more independent and resistant to food shortages caused by economic recession.
 - **Pros:** Increasing the sustainability of the agricultural economy in a village will not only provide a more stable source of food to those in rural areas, but it can also make them less dependent on other industries to provide them with food. During a conflict, most industries will be focused on resources for soldiers, not civilians, who are the ones often malnourished. By introducing sustainable small-scale means of agriculture to villages, rural citizens will be empowered to source their own food and not be reliant on outside parties for food, or food being rationed. Also, if sustainable methods are introduced, it is likely that the industry will not be devastated should there be a conflict in that area.
 - **Cons:** While focusing on the agricultural economy in villages can have many advantages, there will also be disadvantages. If the only focus is on agriculture, a village's food source can be very vulnerable to uncontrollable factors. For example, these rural areas which commonly lack education and representation in government may be vulnerable to heavy taxation which would require these communities to turn in food to feed soldiers, leaving little for those who sourced the food themselves. Also, because of a lack of resources rural areas are vulnerable to natural disasters, which can be devastating to a simple food

resource that lacks the technology to have resilience to disasters. With too much reliance on one industry, there is a large risk in unprecedented factors.

2. Providing women and girls of child bearing age in areas with conflict and or a scarcity of food with birth control and education of birth control.

- **Pros:** Providing women and girls with birth control in war-torn areas will decrease the cases of child malnourishment. A large amount of child malnourishment are babies whose mothers are also malnourished. By providing these women with safe forms of birth control and discouraging them from having children, they are less likely to birth children who they cannot feed, and will have less of a worry feeding their children and more about themselves.
- **Cons:** While providing women and girls with safe forms of birth control, seems to be very beneficial, there can also be some issues. One main issue is that birth control can have unwanted side effects that can affect a woman's health even worse if they are not properly nourished. It is important to note that in many cultures, birth control is stigmatized and even condemned in some cases. So normalizing the use of birth control can be a challenge along with dispersing supplies which are expensive and would be difficult to provide to everyone who needs it, especially in the form of birth control pills.

3. Air dropping supplies during times of intense conflict to areas most affected by war.

- **Pros:** By providing the areas with the most need with required resources, such as clean water and nutritious food, will not completely eliminate malnutrition, but it will support the citizens who are most prone to it. Areas who require the most resources may include areas directly involved in the war, cities that were bombed, or agricultural areas that have been destroyed. For people who are directly affected and have just lost their source of food, this will be one less thing they have to worry about, and will allow them to focus on finding safety, and eventually, finding new food sources.
- **Cons:** One disadvantage of providing and air dropping supplies to areas with the most need is the fact that it is not a very sustainable solution as air dropping food requires a lot of resources - not only food, but planes, fuel, and correct preservation of the food. Also, because it is not sustainable, it will likely be a one-to-few time occurrence, and will only help the malnourished citizens for a short amount of time. Another issue could include the safety of the people delivering the food - because there is war going on, an unannounced plane could be shot down out of fear of enemies.

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Appendix or Appendices

- I. Useful resource on the data of child malnutrition globally:
<https://www.unicef.org/media/69816/file/Joint-malnutrition-estimates-2020.pdf>
- II. Basic information about malnutrition and the different forms of it:
www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/malnutrition