

Food Insecurity in Fragile States: War, Water, and Hunger in Yemen

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Introduction

Since 2014, Yemen has been submerged in a prolonged civil war between Houthi rebels and the internationally recognized government, supported by a Saudi-led coalition. This conflict has been hindered by the country's infrastructure, has torn up its healthcare and education systems, and destroyed the majority of its agricultural opportunities. [The Food and Agricultural Organization \(FAO\) has attested to the reality that Yemen is one of the hotspots of high concern](#) and thus, will require our attention during this critical time to potentially avoid the loss of multiple lives and their means of sustenance. With local food production constantly being disrupted and economic institutions fractured, Yemen's economy has been spiraling into a collapse. Inflation has skyrocketed, while the value of the Yemeni rial has plummeted, which makes even basic food items unaffordable for millions of the population. The situation is further exacerbated by a naval blockade sent by the Saudi-led coalition on Yemen's key Red Sea ports. Since Yemen imports the majority of its food, any obstruction at these ports severely limits food availability across the entire country. Understanding the root causes and multidimensional consequences of this crisis is essential for devising sustainable solutions.

The Collapse of Infrastructure and the Agricultural System

Various humanitarian agencies struggle to bring in essential supplies due to bureaucratic delays, restricted access, and active conflict zones. Even when aid reaches Yemen, distribution is often interrupted by both sides of the conflict, with reports of food and medical supplies being redirected, delayed, or used as leverage in the war. Healthcare systems, educational institutions, and other public services have been destroyed or deemed unsustainable. In addition, Yemen's already dire water situation has deteriorated significantly during the war. Bombings and neglect have further destroyed water treatment facilities and pipelines, forcing many communities to rely on contaminated sources that affect their wellbeing. This has fueled large-scale outbreaks of waterborne diseases like cholera, compounding the suffering of malnourished populations.

Without access to clean water, preventable illnesses become fatal, especially for children and those with compromised immune systems.

Public Health and Water Crisis

The FAO highlights that Yemen's food crisis is rooted in agricultural conflict, compounded by poverty and fragile infrastructure. The loss of farmland, irrigation systems, and farming equipment has severely reduced domestic food production, increasing Yemen's reliance on expensive food imports and further jeopardizing national food security. While external aid and strong social ties previously mitigated severe food insecurity, these safeguards are now weakening and insufficient to prevent further deterioration. Malnutrition rates in Yemen are among the highest in the world. [According to Integrated Food Security Phase Classification \(IPC\), over 17.4 million people face acute food insecurity](#), including 2.2 million children under the age of five. Nearly 540,000 of these children are suffering from severe acute malnutrition (SAM), which if untreated, is a life-threatening condition that calls for urgent intervention. The combination of limited food, unsafe water, and widespread disease creates a deadly feedback loop that [disproportionately affects the most vulnerable populations](#) of children, women, and the elderly. Food, medicine, and other basic necessities have become unaffordable for the majority of Yemenis. With domestic production at a standstill and imports constrained by conflict-related disruptions, food scarcity and malnutrition are widespread.

International Aid Shortfalls and Complications

[Despite up to billions of dollars pledged by the international community, Yemen remains one of the most underfunded humanitarian crises](#). Aid agencies face constant challenges, from lack of donor commitment to security threats on the ground. Political instability and the shifting priorities of donor countries have led to a reduction in aid funding. Additionally, access to hard-to-reach areas remains limited, leaving entire communities without reliable food assistance or healthcare. Yemen's hunger crisis is not only driven by natural disasters but also human-made catastrophe(s) such as war, economic collapse, restricted humanitarian access, and institutional breakdown combining to produce one of the worst food crises in modern history. Addressing

hunger in Yemen requires more than food aid, the population will need a solid ceasefire, restored infrastructure, unrestricted humanitarian access, and long-term political solutions. This is easier said than done but until these conditions are fulfilled, Yemen's people will remain trapped in a continuous cycle of starvation and suffering.

Conclusion

Yemen's hunger crisis is not only the result of environmental hardship, but a human catastrophe born of war, economic collapse, restricted humanitarian access, and institutional breakdown. Addressing hunger in Yemen will require more than emergency aid; it will demand long-term commitments to peace, infrastructure restoration, and international cooperation. Only through coordinated, funding, and strategically implemented reforms can Yemen begin to recover from one of the worst humanitarian disasters of the modern era.

The Impact of Hunger on Women and Children

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

- Women and children are bearing the brunt of the crisis. Of the 4.5 million internally displaced people in Yemen, around 80 percent are women and children. At least 26 percent of displaced households are female-headed — 20 percent of whom are under the age of 18.
- Women and girls are forced to take on the responsibility to sustain their families while facing inequality, limited access to services and multiple barriers due to entrenched sociocultural norms.
- Malnutrition rates among women and children in Yemen remain among the highest in the world, with 1.4 million pregnant or breastfeeding women requiring treatment for acute malnutrition.
- Thousands of children have been killed or maimed since the beginning of the conflict, and thousands more have been recruited into the fighting. Years of conflict, misery and grief have left millions of people in need of mental health and psychosocial services in Yemen.

- The ongoing humanitarian crisis has increased the vulnerability of children and women to exploitation, violence and abuse, child labor, killing and maiming, recruitment and use of children by parties to the conflict as combatants and in various support roles, domestic and gender-based violence, child marriage and psychosocial distress.

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