



# Leave No Community Behind

Making the U.N. General Assembly Work for the World's Crisis-Affected Contexts

September 2023

This week, world leaders will convene in New York for the annual United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)—a gathering that has unfortunately become notable not for the combined political and diplomatic power concentrated in one place at one time, but for the annual failure to leverage that power to address the world's most pressing challenges.

This year's UNGA rightly focuses on the need to make progress against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the importance of “rebuilding trust and reigniting global solidarity.” UNGA 2023 arrives in a world of renewed great power rivalry, deepening distrust between the Global North and Global South, and public frustration with how their governments use resources and manage crises. As the divide between stable and fragile countries grows deeper, for the Global North to regain the trust of the Global South, they must deliver genuine financial commitments to humanitarian and development action. Not meeting the \$100 billion funding commitment for climate financing for developing countries and funding just one-third of humanitarian response plans for Sudan, Syria, and Yemen are symptoms of this lack of global solidarity.

Nowhere is this failure more evident than in the status of the Sustainable Development Goals, now at the halfway point of the 15-year plan. The goals were meant to galvanize an ambitious, but achievable global agenda, but instead have become a marker of just how little progress is being made in the shared interest of human development, safety and prosperity. The risk is not just that individuals are being left behind by the SDGs, it's that entire communities, even entire countries, are being left behind. The Secretary-General warned that more than half the world is off track to fulfill the SDGs by 2030, and the picture is most bleak for crisis-affected communities.

When the SDGs were adopted in 2015, 261 million people lived in extreme poverty in fragile and conflict-affected communities. At the end of the SDGs in 2030, an estimated 348 million people are projected to live in extreme poverty in fragile and conflict-affected states—a 33% increase from 2015. Today one-third of all people living in extreme poverty are concentrated in just 15 countries that are both climate vulnerable and conflict affected. These three trends,

which will continue to compound over the next decade in ways that exacerbate the needs of crisis-affected communities, represent the new geography of crisis.

Yet these are exactly the contexts most likely to be left out of global action because they are seen as too hard to reach, too complicated to operate in, too different for traditional approaches to work. But solutions exist that work even in these challenging contexts, and a new approach is needed urgently to ensure the divide between fragile and stable countries does not further deepen.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) calls on world leaders to rally around the three areas of hunger, child survival and the climate crisis to save the lives of the extreme poor. These are the areas in which the most vulnerable are being grossly failed, and represent not only the tip of the spear of the SDGs, but where concerted action across global divides would reap the greatest lifesaving dividends.

The true test for global leaders this week is whether they can show progress against the most basic questions facing vulnerable communities around the world: Can I afford to feed my family? Can I ensure the survival of my children? What happens to my home if it's underwater or my crops if there's a drought?

While humanitarian solutions alone cannot solve political problems, political solutions are not possible without humanitarian solutions. These humanitarian solutions, developed from the International Rescue Committee's 90 years of programmatic experience, can unlock some of the world's most intractable problems and break the paralysis of action at UNGA 2023.

## Hunger

### **Preventing Famine and Deaths from Food Insecurity**

#### **PROBLEM**

This year, in Somalia, the world narrowly avoided its first formal famine declaration since the South Sudan famine in 2017, as an historic drought exacerbated by the climate crisis collided with conflicts across East Africa to push the region to the brink of starvation. But the absence of a formal famine declaration in 2023 did not prevent loss of life and other disastrous impacts present at all levels of acute food insecurity. During the 2011 famine in Somalia, a staggering 260,000 died—but half of those deaths occurred before a famine was even declared.

The food security picture heading into 2024 looks especially ominous, making it harder to avoid the rising threat of famine and significant deaths from hunger and malnutrition next year. The Russian withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, new and protracted conflicts in some of the most climate-vulnerable and least-developed countries around the world like Sudan and Niger, the retreat of humanitarian funding, and challenging environmental conditions driven by

this year's El Niño season and the growing impacts of the climate crisis are all likely to increase rates of food insecurity, deaths from hunger, and the risk of famine in 2024.

This is an especially dangerous moment for conflict-affected communities. More than 40% of people globally who cannot afford adequate food (IPC 3 or above) live in just five conflict-affected countries—the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Yemen. Similarly, the Food & Agriculture Organization, the World Food Programme, and the Famine Early Warning Systems Network identify nine countries<sup>1</sup>—all of which are fragile or conflict affected—where populations face starvation and death absent urgent humanitarian intervention.

## **GOAL**

Avoid famine and reduce by half the number of people living in emergency or catastrophic food insecurity (IPC 4/5).

## **SOLUTION**

Preventing food insecurity from turning into starvation requires a focused effort targeting the world's most at-risk communities to halt the threat of famine from taking root, not just responding when those conditions emerge. The world needs an empowered body with the authority to galvanize collective action in response to early warning of famine.

The High-Level Task Force on Preventing Famine (HLTF), set up two years ago by the U.N. Secretary-General, should play this critical role but it needs commitment from political and U.N. leaders to fulfill this mandate. A re-energized HLTF should break down silos, focus attention and galvanize early action across donors, international financial institutions, climate, humanitarian and development actors around a united objective to prevent famine in the most at-risk countries. The task force should support diplomatic efforts to unlock barriers on the ground to scale up a response and turn delivery plans into action.

More information on how to re-energize the High-Level Task Force on Preventing Famine can be found [here](#).

## Child Survival

### **Fighting Acute Malnutrition Among Children**

#### **PROBLEM**

Two million children under 5 years old die every year from acute malnutrition, otherwise known as wasting. Wasting is responsible for 1 in 5 deaths in children under age 5 worldwide, making it one of the top threats to child wellness and survival. The compounding crises of conflict,

<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Mali, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Yemen.

climate change and extreme poverty contribute to [the rise](#) of child wasting—whether through floods increasing rates of cholera or poverty putting nutritious meals out of the reach of families. But deaths due to wasting are preventable. A [proven solution](#), using a shelf-stable, fortified peanut paste known as Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), exists that helps 92% of acutely malnourished children recover, yet 80% of children suffering from acute malnutrition historically do not have access to this lifesaving remedy. Additionally, the current treatment and delivery system is unnecessarily complex, inefficient and bifurcated, with two U.N. agencies delivering two products to treat severe acute malnutrition (SAM) and moderate acute malnutrition (MAM) separately.

## **GOAL**

Close the 80% wasting treatment gap.

## **SOLUTION**

The goal of closing the persistent 80% treatment gap and saving the lives of millions of children threatened by childhood wasting is within reach, but will require a new approach to how the world fights childhood acute malnutrition. The first step is the adoption of a simplified, streamlined approach to diagnosis and treatment that breaks down the existing bifurcation between WFP and UNICEF. More than a decade of [IRC evidence](#) shows this simplified, combined approach increases the cost effectiveness and scalability of treatment by using 30% less RUTF and costing 20% less per severely malnourished child treated.

The second step is a new people-first delivery model that focuses on bringing treatment to children through the use of community health workers rather than bringing malnourished children to static treatment facilities that are often inaccessible for food-insecure populations living in conflict zones.

Third, overcoming the complex range of barriers to treatment in a given context requires a level of focus and coordination, particularly with local civil society and community representatives, that simply does not exist in the current system. This can be accomplished through a series of national action plans that build context-specific, people-first strategies and give community leaders a seat at the table in a meaningful way. These national action plans should be supported by a new financing model that consolidates resources for fighting malnutrition and distributes funds according to the joint strategy.

Finally, the success of this new approach will also depend on the strength of a global coalition led by affected countries and communities, donor governments, the U.N. system, and NGOs and local civil society working hand in hand and holding one another accountable for progress.

More information on what a new approach to end acute child malnutrition would entail can be found [here](#).

# The Climate Crisis

## Making Climate Action Work for Conflict-Affected Communities

### PROBLEM

The three global challenges of climate change, extreme poverty and conflict are converging and becoming increasingly concentrated in a handful of states. These conflict-affected states represent the front lines of the climate crisis. While climate change is the crisis of tomorrow for most of the world, climate is the crisis of today in the communities the IRC serves. But these communities are increasingly left out of global efforts on climate action, receiving proportionately less funding, delivery approaches that are overly reliant on governments and formal institutions that are not present in conflict settings, and a focus on emissions mitigation instead of adaptation, anticipatory action and resilience. Coming out of what is likely the hottest summer in recorded history, UNGA is one of several critical moments leading up to COP28 to put climate-vulnerable, conflict-affected communities back on the map for climate action.

### GOAL

Improve the climate readiness scores and reduce the vulnerability scores on the ND-GAIN climate vulnerability index of the 15 countries<sup>2</sup> that are both climate vulnerable and conflict affected.

### SOLUTION

The solution to making climate action work for the world's most vulnerable communities is by taking a people-first approach to deliver climate financing that is adequate in scale, accessible to vulnerable communities and appropriate for the context-specific challenges at hand.

The first step is to ensure the amount of climate financing available is adequate for the task at hand. This requires unlocking more funding, recommitting to and increasing the \$100 billion climate pledge with new and additional funding, and increasing the use of grants and low-cost loans instead of non-concessional debt through the use of mechanisms like the World Bank's International Development Assistance funds.

But expanding the amount of funding available alone is not enough. This funding also needs to be more accessible for conflict-affected communities by bringing in new delivery partners like local civil society groups and women-led organizations to ensure climate action can reach every community. In conflict settings the government often lacks the control or the capacity to deliver services, leaving civil society and community-based groups best positioned to reach people in need. This approach should become the new norm, not the exception, to climate programming.

<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Myanmar, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen

Finally, it is critical to invest in context-appropriate interventions to strengthen climate resilience and adaptation in these settings and generate evidence of what works. This includes supporting and testing the impact of anticipatory action and food security efforts, such as the anticipatory cash and seed security initiatives the IRC is implementing in Nigeria and northeast Syria, respectively.