

# THE INTERCONNECTED CHALLENGE OF MODERN CONFLICT AND MALNUTRITION



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Malnutrition remains one of the most urgent and preventable threats to child survival globally. Significant progress has been made in recent decades in areas such as wasting in children that has declined from 52 million in 2016 to 42.8 million by 2024.<sup>1</sup> However, global funding cuts to Official Development Assistance (ODA) in 2025 – alongside trends towards escalating conflict and displacement – now threaten to reverse hard-won gains. Both protracted and emerging conflicts undermine food systems and restrict access to life-saving treatment such as Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF). According to the Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC), conflict remains the main driver of acute food insecurity in the countries with worst food crises.<sup>2</sup>

The United Kingdom is uniquely positioned to be a global leader on tackling malnutrition and conflict. It has significant expertise through its academic institutions, civil society, its branches of government including the FCDO, and through partnerships with civil society and convening power at the multilateral level, through institutions such as the UN and NATO. The UK is also widely recognised as a global leader in Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA), with decades of operational experience and diplomatic leadership that help create the conditions for stability, recovery, and safe access to food, services, and livelihoods. Addressing malnutrition and conflict is integral to the UK Government achieving its foreign policy objectives set out in their 2024 manifesto from development, economic growth, tackling migration, to building the UK's reputation on the global stage.<sup>3</sup>

This paper therefore sets out a clear means for the UK to strengthen its global leadership by promoting a more integrated and effective approach to conflict recovery and development. It highlights the links between malnutrition and conflict and demonstrates how integrated interventions – particularly those that combine nutrition services with landmine clearance and agricultural recovery – can unlock long-term resilience and stability in fragile and conflict-affected states. By aligning these interventions, the UK can also deliver better value for money across its defence, diplomacy and development programmes, maximising impact per pound spent.



## SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

As part of its commitment to the Global Compact on Nutrition Integration, the UK should formalise strategies that tie together humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts.

Scale up support for nutrition services in conflict and post-conflict contexts and prioritise financing and delivery gaps for essential treatments – such as RUTF.

Leverage platforms such as the Child Nutrition Fund (CNF) to pool resources, coordinate financing, lead on setting best practice, and accelerate delivery of life-saving nutrition supplies in fragile contexts.

Integrate the impact of landmine contamination on food security into UK-funded nutrition strategies and build in demining as a foundational step for achieving nutrition outcomes.

In areas affected by landmines, project development should identify ways to achieve interoperability between explosive ordnance risk education sessions and malnutrition and immunisation referral systems to ensure integration across humanitarian and development responses.

Include nutrition, health and development outcome indicators in peacebuilding programme evaluations, reflecting the broader development and security gains.



## INTRODUCTION

Nutrition is the bedrock of human development, and through coordinated global investment, the world has made impressive progress in reducing malnutrition, particularly wasting in children that has declined from 52 million in 2016 to 42.8 million by 2024.<sup>4</sup> However, despite these gains, malnutrition remains one of the leading causes of death for children under the age of five, with more than 2 million children dying annually.<sup>5</sup>

Modern conflicts rarely stem from a single cause; they emerge from complex and context-specific combinations of socio-economic, institutional, cultural and political factors that are often shaped by power dynamics.<sup>6</sup> In fragile and conflict-affected states, food insecurity can intensify these pressures by deepening grievances, weakening community resilience, and heightening social tensions that can spark unrest.<sup>7</sup> When conflict does erupt, it disrupts food systems, restricts access to nutritious food, and drives new waves of food insecurity – with malnutrition being its most severe and life-threatening outcome.

In the last five years alone, conflict levels have doubled,<sup>8</sup> and we are now experiencing a record number of armed conflicts since WWII.<sup>9</sup> This has left over two billion people – a quarter of the world’s population – living in places affected by violent conflict.<sup>10</sup> The alarming trends in armed conflict indicate an urgent need for a new approach to preventing, reducing, responding to and recovering from armed conflict. This will require a clear understanding of how conflict intersects with food insecurity, and how malnutrition is an outcome that exacerbates risks faced by already insecure communities living in fragile places.

This comes at a time when global development services face unexpected funding cuts, with UNICEF estimating that at least 14 million children are facing disruptions to nutrition support and services, leaving them at heightened risk of severe malnutrition and death.<sup>11</sup> Even in priority settings, more than 2 million children suffering from a deadly form of malnutrition could go without a treatment that is known to bring a child back from the brink of death in a matter of weeks through Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF).<sup>12</sup>

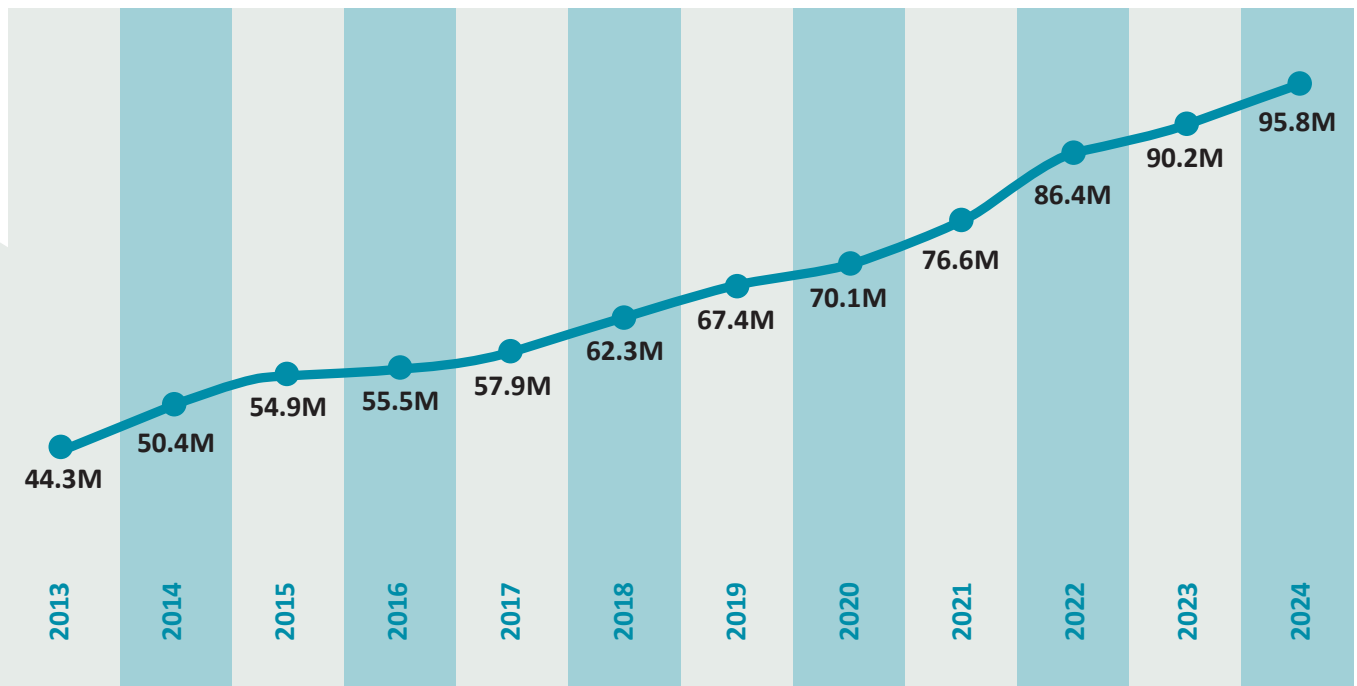
In the UK, since the 2020 merger that formed the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO), there have been two rounds of ODA cuts from 0.7% to 0.5% in 2021, to 0.5% to 0.3% in 2025.<sup>13</sup> The UK government must find ways to ensure it can still contribute to achieving and sustaining peace around the world. Doing so requires an integrated approach that draws on British expertise, evidence, and technical capability, and uses well-designed programming to maximise the impact of ODA in fragile and conflict-affected states. This means aligning and coordinating programmatic approaches across government so that limited resources reinforce one another rather than operate in isolation.



# FOOD INSECURITY, CONFLICT AND FORCED DISPLACEMENT

The World Food Programme estimates that every 1% increase in food insecurity is accompanied by a 2% increase in migration.<sup>14</sup> Where extreme hunger and child deaths fester, so do anger, instability, and violence, exerting a powerful destabilising effect on communities. In 2023, nearly 282 million people faced high levels of acute food insecurity – meaning their lives and livelihoods were in immediate danger.<sup>15</sup> The Global Report on Food Crises (GRFC) have identified a continuing upward trend of increasing displacement from countries/territories with food crises. In 2024, the number of forcibly displaced people from countries with food crises reached 95.8 million, this is nearly double the number of displaced people from one decade earlier.<sup>16</sup>

**Number of displaced people in 52 countries/territories with food crises and data meeting GRFC technical requirements, 2013-2024.**



2025 GRFC Report. Sources: 2013–2023: UNHCR, IDMC, UNRWA; 2024: UNHCR nowcasted estimates December 2024, IOM, UNWRA.

Violent conflict also leads to the destruction of assets and resources, the destruction of human capital, and increased diversion of resources into the wider operating environment.<sup>17</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have shown that when critical infrastructure is hit by explosive weapons – water, sanitation, electrical supply, and healthcare are all impacted. The interdependency of these lifelines creates a direct impact on already fragile food systems. Explosive weapons can also contaminate agricultural land rendering it unsafe for grazing or crop production.<sup>18</sup> Together, these impacts make conditions in areas affected by explosive weapons more challenging. Responding to explosive threats in conflict settings requires a coordinated response that integrates explosive ordnance hazard assessment with other humanitarian responses to ensure safe and efficient support to affected communities. This approach helps restore agricultural land to productive use and creates the safe conditions needed to reestablish interdependent lifelines – including water, electricity and food systems – in urban environments.

A 2019 study found that explosive weapons in populated areas directly contributed to difficulties in accessing food in Yemen.<sup>19</sup> In 2015, Hodeidah port, the largest in Yemen, which received up to 80% of all of Yemen’s commercial imports, was heavily damaged by air strikes. It was subsequently reported that this led to a rise in food insecurity and significant reduction in imported fuel. During this time, food prices rose by 28%, when resources and government capacity was already severely hindered due to the impact of conflict.<sup>20</sup>

In many post-conflict countries, governments may not have the capacity to recover the assets, resources and capital needed to recover. This will often have a direct impact on food security; self-reliant rural producers turn into dependent consumers, agrifood value chains are disrupted, and food transportation systems are no longer functioning.<sup>21</sup> It is in these contexts, where humanitarian aid plays a crucial role in supporting those most at risk.

If communities affected by conflict are to return to their livelihoods, they will also require the foundations of a functioning food system restored. Building resilience requires investing in the structures that allow communities to produce, access, and sustain their own food. This includes strengthening local markets, rehabilitating agricultural infrastructure, and supporting smallholder farmers with the tools, inputs, and knowledge needed to restart production. Integrating climate-smart practices is equally important, ensuring that recovery efforts create systems capable of withstanding future shocks.

Long-term solutions also depend on integrated approaches that link humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. When these strands work together, they can rebuild institutions, restore trust, and support conflict-sensitive resource management. At the same time, nutrition services must be scaled up and embedded into programme design, indicators, and evaluations across peacebuilding and development initiatives. Only by combining these elements can communities regain their livelihoods and develop the resilience needed to navigate both conflict and climate pressures, and the lasting impacts these can have on communities.



## IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON ACCESS AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Malnutrition and conflict are inextricably linked – hunger drives conflict, and conflict worsens hunger. During active conflicts, there are many barriers in delivering essential nutrition services. These include multiple security and accessibility issues, supply shortages of important commodities, such as RUTF and micronutrient supplements, insufficient human resources, displacement of communities making it difficult to reach and track vulnerable populations to provide follow-up care.

One of the drivers of insecure food systems and primary barriers to communities being able to recover from conflict is the presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance (UXO). The presence of landmines and UXO restricts access to schools, healthcare, arable land, markets and transport infrastructure. The isolation of communities can have lasting impact on their livelihoods, alongside living in the daily presence of explosive hazards capable of killing and maiming. There are currently 57 states and other areas contaminated by anti-personnel landmines, and in 2024 there were at least 6,279 casualties of landmines and explosive remnants of war.<sup>22</sup>

These devices have a direct impact on food security, particularly in countries where rural communities rely heavily on locally produced goods and subsistence farming. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations states that many of the countries with high levels of landmine contamination and explosive ordnance victims also suffer with severe acute food insecurity, affecting over 146 million people.<sup>23</sup> It is often rural communities who are disproportionately impacted as the threats created by landmines limit access to essential farmland and grazing areas.

When assessing food-insecure communities, the presence of landmines and explosive remnants of war must be factored in. Integrating mine-action assessments ensures that hazardous areas can be cleared, allowing communities to safely reclaim fertile land and rebuild reliable, self-sustaining food systems. It also facilitates other critical humanitarian action that reinforces food security such as rehabilitation of water and sanitation systems. Humanitarian Mine Action should be viewed as an enabling activity – not separate from food security but a prerequisite for it.

## IMPACT OF CONFLICT ON FOOD SYSTEMS

Food systems are inherently cross-border – reliant on international markets, regional transport corridors, and shared natural resources – shocks in one place can quickly cascade across entire regions. Building resilience to conflict-related food system shocks is therefore essential in enabling communities to withstand disruptions and maintain access to safe, nutritious food despite the globalised nature of modern supply chains. This is why major development partners, including the UK should prioritise approaches that strengthen sustainable nutritional outcomes in fragile and conflict affected places, ensuring that resilience is not just about surviving crises but supporting long-term wellbeing and stability.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to approximately 30% of Ukraine's agricultural land being inaccessible. Municipal blockades, seed and fertiliser shortages, and Ukraine's large share of global wheat production led to global wheat prices increasing by almost 25%.<sup>24</sup> According to the Tony Blair Institute, 28,000 square kilometres of agricultural land has been abandoned because of landmines and other impacts of war. This relates to \$8.9bn in agricultural exports per year – a sector that previously made up 41% of all Ukrainian exports.<sup>25</sup>

This impact doesn't end in Ukraine. According to the World Food Programme, prior to the full-scale invasion Ukraine produced enough food per year to feed 400 million people worldwide.<sup>26</sup> In 2022, global food prices sharply increased with exports from Ukraine being brought to a standstill. Since then, prices have stabilised but continue to rise. As the recipients of 92% of Ukraine's wheat exports, African and Asian countries have been significantly impacted.<sup>27</sup> The Black Sea Grain Initiative played an important role in easing these pressures, with 17.6% of its shipments reaching developing countries – a contribution that helped maintain access to affordable staples for those most at risk and demonstrated how coordinated international action can soften the global shock.<sup>28</sup> Even so, the experience underscored how deeply many low-income countries depend on stable flows from major food-exporting regions, and how quickly conflict can reverberate across interconnected food systems.

In Yemen, before 2022 around 50% of the wheat supply came from Russia and Ukraine. Following the full-scale invasion, food prices rose by one third which has contributed to a significant increase in Yemeni citizens being dependent on humanitarian aid.<sup>29</sup> In 2025, 17 million people are facing severe food insecurity, with 3.5 million people affected by acute malnutrition.<sup>30</sup> In contexts like Yemen, where protracted conflict, chronic underdevelopment, economic instability and hyperinflation have already weakened local food production and markets, the ripple effect of external crises – such as the war in Ukraine – can be devastating. This interconnectedness makes it essential to invest in long-term approaches that strengthen food security and build resilience to conflict-related shocks, rather than having to rely solely on short-term humanitarian responses.

By supporting diversified livelihoods, restoring agricultural systems, improving market functionality, and reinforcing community-level coping capacities, communities can better withstand the globalised nature of modern food systems and supply chains. Ultimately, the goal is not just to keep people fed during crises but to ensure sustainable nutritional outcomes over time. This ambition should be championed by key development partners such as the UK, and adopt a clear focus on resilience, stability, and long-term wellbeing. Nutrition outcome indicators should be incorporated into peacebuilding programmes, encouraging partnership-based approaches. Local and international NGOs can then collaborate to ensure interventions are complementary and reinforcing.

## AFGHANISTAN

In Afghanistan, it is estimated that 14.8 million people are living with acute food insecurity through March 2025.<sup>31</sup> The World Food Programme (WFP) has stated that they can only provide emergency food assistance to just over 6 million people per month – only 40% of those who need it.<sup>32</sup> It is among the 15 countries with the highest burden of acute malnutrition, with at least 3 million children under five requiring lifesaving nutrition treatment every year, a figure that rose to 3.5 million in 2025.<sup>33</sup>

Despite this urgent need for support, organisations such as Action Against Hunger, which continue to operate in the country, have had to turn away children since March in need of lifesaving care following the withdrawal of funding.<sup>34</sup> However, donors such as the European Union are stepping in, and some services were able to reopen in 2025 and resume the crucially needed lifesaving care. While this support has been instrumental in reopening some of the nutrition sites that deliver care, many others continue to face closures. Since last year's reductions in global aid expenditure, more than 400 health facilities and 396 nutrition sites have closed across Afghanistan.<sup>35</sup> Organisations in this area continue to seek further funding to ensure essential services can be sustained.

The legacy of conflict remains in Afghanistan, with nearly one in five people (6.4 million Afghans) impacted by the presence of landmines and UXO in the country.<sup>36</sup> These devices are the remnants of four decades of conflicts dating back as far as the Soviet invasion in the 1980s through to the more recent conflict where the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have become more common. Landmines, IEDs and UXO litter roadsides, buildings, and large parts of agricultural land. The presence of these devices holds back development and agricultural renewal, which is vital in supporting many millions of Afghan adults and children who are living with acute food insecurity and malnutrition. The United Nations estimate that 21.9 million people in Afghanistan will require humanitarian assistance in 2026.<sup>37</sup> Continued UK support in Afghanistan will be critical to addressing challenges such as landmines and related issues, including food and water security, while also encouraging other government donors to maintain their support for the people of Afghanistan in the years ahead.





*Zabul Province, Afghanistan (2025). Land being used for agricultural purposes after being cleared of landmines using funding provided by the FCDO.*

## CASE STUDY

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*Between 2022 and 2025, The HALO Trust and Action contre la Faim (Action Against Hunger) developed a joint project in Afghanistan. The project involved the development of an integrated emergency nutrition, health, mental health and psychosocial support, alongside mine action response, particularly in more marginalised groups living in mine-affected areas.*

*The project was designed around geographical overlap in Afghanistan between mine action activities taking place nearby and Therapeutic Feeding Units (TFU). A process of mutual referrals was developed where recipients of explosive ordnance risk education sessions who were at risk from malnourishment could be referred to TFUs. At the same time, TFUs encouraged reporting of explosive hazards people may have encountered and referred these reports back to The HALO Trust for their survey teams to investigate.*

*The project allowed for more efficient cooperation between nutrition and mine action responses during crises. This took place through the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) who funded this project.*



## ANGOLA

Empirical evidence demonstrates that interventions aimed at enhancing access to nutritious food and bolstering agricultural productivity yield tangible benefits in reducing hunger, improving nutrition outcomes, and fostering socio-economic development.<sup>38</sup> In Angola, The HALO Trust has found that clearing landmines leads to a 199% increase in crop income and a 58% increase in investment in agricultural inputs, such as seeds and hand tools in communities where landmines were cleared. It also led to a 38% increase in crop diversification, reflecting a break in subsistence patterns seen in post-conflict areas, with farmers growing more than their own staple food. This provides a catalysing impact across the community, markets, and food supply chains.

In Angola, it was previously cheaper to import potatoes from Brazil to Luanda than it was to grow them, distribute, and sell them in Angola itself.<sup>39</sup> This was primarily due to the condition of the roads, which were heavily impacted by the conflict and landmine laying across large parts of the country. Clearance operations have allowed for fields to be reopened, and crucially, the reopening of the Lobito Corridor and other rail-based shipping routes. After its reopening, there was a marked decrease in potato imports as produce could be grown and distributed locally. A more integrated approach – linking areas like demining, food systems, and nutrition programming – will be essential to building sustainable peace and prosperity in conflict-affected regions.

*Cuito, Angola (2024). This school was built on what was one of the first minefields The HALO Trust cleared in Angola in 1994.*

## THE OPPORTUNITY

The UK has a strong track record in supporting humanitarian and nutrition development initiatives. At the Nutrition for Growth Summit in March 2025, the UK took leadership in launching the Global Compact for Nutrition Integration with global partners.<sup>40</sup> This builds on its existing commitment to integrate nutrition across development and humanitarian work. The UK is well-positioned to catalyse the much-needed synergy between post-conflict rebuilding efforts, agriculture, and nutrition, within the HDP nexus.

In the context of shrinking Official Development Assistance, integrating mine action and food security programming offers much-needed efficiency by co-locating and leveraging existing operational infrastructure and local capacity. Humanitarian mine action provides a highly effective entry point, using established field teams, transport logistics, and community engagement protocols to systematically identify and clear productive agricultural land, while simultaneously enabling the delivery of nutrition-sensitive interventions, like health and dietary education, in the same newly-secured areas.

Addressing conflict-related barriers, such as landmine contamination, is not only a security imperative, but also a public health and economic one. Clearance operations restore access to agricultural land, schools, markets, and health facilities – enabling both recovery and growth. Moreover, countries emerging from conflict have shown the potential to produce therapeutic nutrition products locally, using indigenous crops, provided they have the necessary land access and safe infrastructure.

By adopting a more integrated model, the UK can drive transformational outcomes for vulnerable communities while also advancing its foreign policy, development, and humanitarian objectives. Improved nutrition in conflict-affected places is a stabilising force, an economic enabler, and a vital component of sustainable peacebuilding. By placing resilience and improved nutrition outcomes at the centre of its approach, the UK can help build stronger livelihoods and enable communities to remain secure and self-sustaining in an increasingly volatile and unpredictable global environment.





## OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- As part of its commitment to the Global Compact on Nutrition Integration, the UK should formalise strategies that tie together humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding efforts. Programme planning within respective areas should require consideration of potential collaboration and/or support in the other areas to maximise impact. In the case of Humanitarian Mine Action, this would involve providing additional grants for agricultural capacity building in those areas, and where there is a high burden of malnutrition, ensuring localised approaches to clearance prioritisation is adopted to account for food security needs.
- Scale support for nutrition services in conflict and post-conflict contexts by addressing financing and delivery gaps for essential treatment – particularly RUTF – to ensure the 2.4 million people at risk maintain continuous access.
- Leveraging platforms such as the Child Nutrition Fund (CNF) to pool resources, coordinate financing, and accelerate delivery of lifesaving nutrition supplies in fragile contexts. Beyond financing, the CNF should actively integrate nutrition across other platforms, ensuring countries embed creative, well-designed approaches into their multi-year programmes. With FCDO's oversight role on the CNF steering committee, the UK can also drive a robust learning agenda – capturing insights on how, where, and when integration catalyses progress, and feeding this evidence back into programme design and global practice.
- Explicitly consider the impact of landmine contamination on food security in UK-funded nutrition strategies and integrate demining as a foundational step for nutrition outcomes. In practice, this should involve integrated needs assessments involving both nutrition and food actors, Humanitarian Mine Action organisations, and engagement within the local community and key stakeholders in the affected partner state.
- In areas affected by landmines, project development should identify ways to achieve interoperability between explosive ordnance risk education sessions and malnutrition and immunisation referral systems to ensure integration across humanitarian and development responses.
- Include nutrition, health and development outcome indicators in peacebuilding programme evaluations, reflecting their broader development and security gains.

# ENDNOTES

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