



unicef  
for every child

# First Foods Africa

Addressing Child  
Food Poverty  
and Malnutrition

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# First Foods

## The Challenge

Globally, one in four children under 5 years of age (181 million) live in severe child food poverty. One-third of these children (59 million) live in sub-Saharan Africa.

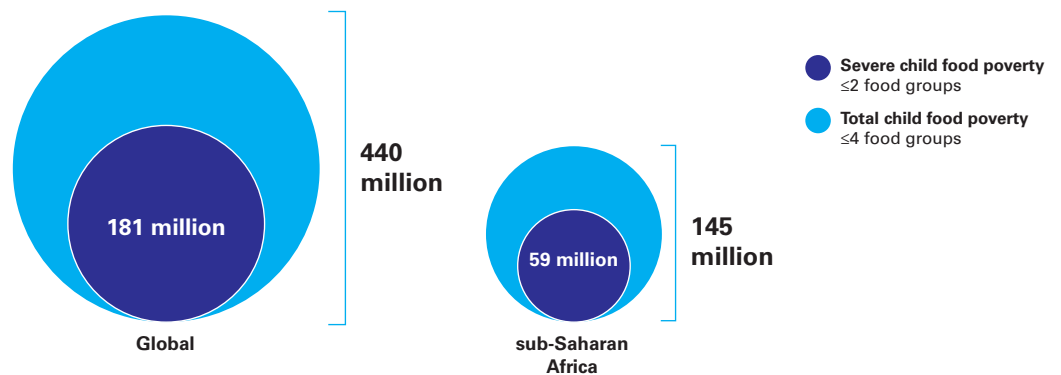
Children living in severe child food poverty are fed extremely poor diets consisting of only one or two food groups a day, instead of the minimum five food groups recommended for child survival, growth, and development. They may survive on a few staple grains, but lack nutrient-rich foods, such as animal-source foods (eggs, fish, dairy, meat), legumes, fruits and vegetables.

Child food poverty is the main driver of the persistently high rates of child undernutrition in sub-Saharan Africa – including **stunting** and **wasting** in early childhood – which affect more than one-third of children under 5 years of age.

UNICEF analyses identify **three major drivers** of child food poverty in early life:

- Poor food environments for young children
- Poor feeding practices in early childhood
- Income poverty in the household

Globally, **440 million** children under 5 are living in child food poverty, of which **181 million** children under 5 are living in severe child food poverty



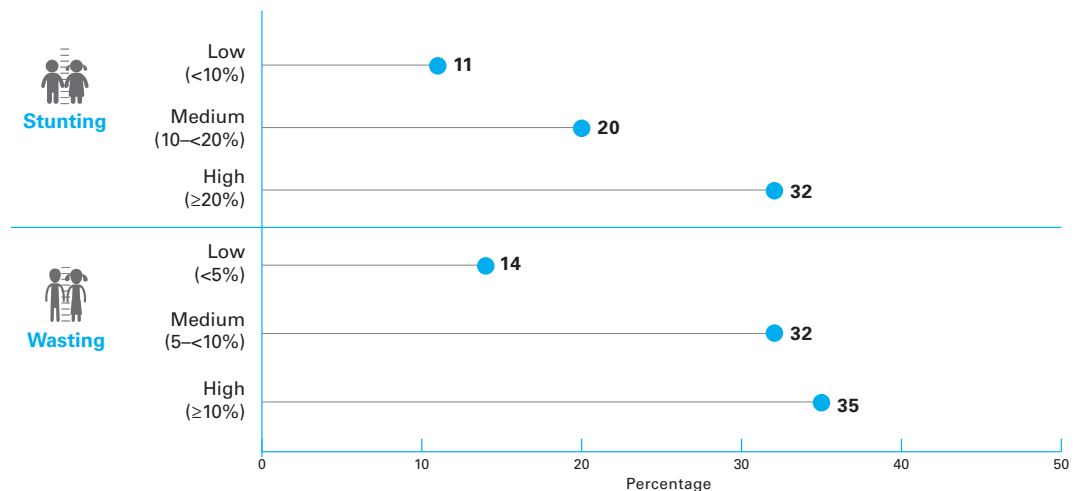
These drivers persist because food, health, and social protection systems are failing families and their young children: **food systems** are failing to provide families with nutritious, safe and affordable first foods designed to meet the unique dietary needs of young children; **health systems** are failing to provide families with the essential nutrition services, counselling and support children and families need; and **social protection systems** are failing to provide vulnerable children with safety nets to make nutritious first foods available and affordable to the poorest children and families.

Traditional and current food security initiatives do not account for children’s unique nutrient needs. They tend to focus on improving household access to staple foods and incomes from agriculture, while leaving children’s need for nutrient-dense foods unaddressed.

To change this, **innovative large-scale approaches are needed to improve children’s first foods, food environments and food practices.** And UNICEF is uniquely positioned to drive this food system transformation – in partnership with national governments, private sector leaders, and development partners – and contribute to realizing the right to adequate nutrition for every child in Africa.

**Figure 1:** Percentage of children living in severe food poverty in countries with a low, medium and high prevalence of child stunting and child wasting.

Source: UNICEF global databases, 2023.



# First Foods Africa

## The Initiative

UNICEF's First Foods Africa will support local production and consumption of nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods and food supplements for young children in Africa. First Foods Africa builds on UNICEF's expertise and experience with local production of ready-to-use therapeutic foods; it is guided by the UNICEF Nutrition Strategy 2020–2030 and UNICEF's vision on Food Systems for Children; and it aims to respond to child food poverty in Africa by:

- **Incentivizing local production** of nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods and food supplements through partnerships between public and private leaders and stakeholders who are committed to addressing child food poverty and meeting the nutrient needs of young children.
- **Shaping policy environments** to protect, promote and support children's access to nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods and food supplements through market-based and social protection approaches, and improved food standards, guidelines, and policies, including fiscal policies.
- **Stimulating consumption** of nutritious first foods and food supplements through large-scale social marketing and social and behaviour change programmes, with direct public procurement and delivery in fragile contexts and humanitarian action.

### First Foods Africa will focus on five types of first foods and food supplements

First foods and food supplements	<b>Complementary foods:</b> Packaged nutritious complementary foods comprised of grains, animal or plant source protein, vitamins and other micronutrient.
	<b>Food ingredients:</b> minimally-transformed foods, such as dried powders made of a single food such egg, fish, legumes and nuts that can be added to home-prepared complementary foods.
	<b>Food snacks:</b> Nutrient-dense, safe, palatable and affordable snacks that can be used as a complement to home-prepared foods for young children.
	<b>Small supplements:</b> Small-quantity lipid-based nutrient supplements (SQ-LNS) to enrich home-prepared complementary foods with energy and essential micronutrients.
	<b>Micronutrient powders:</b> Multiple micronutrient powders (MNPs) containing essential micronutrients for home-based fortification of home-prepared complementary foods.

### First Foods Africa will comprise three main pillars and six key actions

Three pillars	Six actions
Incentivizing local production	<b>Increase market availability and affordability</b> of nutritious, safe and sustainable first foods and food supplements specifically designed for young children.
	<b>Procure and effectively deliver</b> nutritious, safe and sustainable first foods and food supplements for vulnerable children in fragile and humanitarian settings in a timely manner.
Shaping policy environments	<b>Strengthen national and regional standards and norms</b> for the formulation and promotion of first foods and food supplements for young children.
	<b>Strengthen social protection systems</b> to increase access to nutritious first foods and food supplements for infants and young children from income-poor families.
Stimulating consumption	<b>Support social marketing actions</b> to make locally-produced nutritious, safe and sustainable first foods and food supplements desirable to families and communities.
	<b>Support social and behaviour change</b> to help caregivers and families feed their infants and young children locally-produced nutritious first foods and food supplements.



## First Foods Africa and the Climate Crisis: Good for Children, Good for the Planet

The climate crisis threatens to worsen child food poverty and is slowing – and at times reversing – global progress on ending child malnutrition. In sub-Saharan Africa, an additional 10 million children are projected to suffer stunting by 2050 as a result of climate change. At the same time, unsustainable food systems are driving environmental degradation and climate change.

The **UNICEF Agenda for Child Nutrition and Climate Action** outlines UNICEF's commitment to position child nutrition within climate action. This agenda will contribute to preventing child malnutrition through actions to anticipate, adapt and respond to the impacts of climate crises on children's access to nutritious diets, nutrition services and nutrition practices. In addition, it will support efforts to mitigate climate change by improving the availability and affordability of sustainable, low-carbon, nutritious diets.

First Foods Africa is a signature initiative within UNICEF's climate-nutrition agenda. It aims to shield children's diets and nutrition from the impacts of climate change by improving access to safe, affordable and sustainable first foods and food supplements for young children in Africa – both in anticipation of and in response to climate crises. It will also contribute to mitigation efforts by incentivizing local production and providing a sustainable alternative to ultra-processed foods, which are linked to biodiversity loss, greenhouse gasses and plastic pollution.

These features make First Foods Africa an innovative and compelling bankable initiative under climate financing streams, which have minimally considered child food poverty and nutrition to date. With increasing strain on international nutrition budgets and growing calls for new financing mechanisms for nutrition, climate financing offers an opportunity to finance First Foods Africa.

## First Foods Africa

Partnerships and financing

First Foods Africa will foster Africa-owned public-private partnerships. UNICEF aims to work primarily with **national and local governments** and a selected number of **medium-to-large African food companies** with national and regional reach who are committed to joining forces to end child food poverty and malnutrition in Africa.

UNICEF will also build on its longstanding collaboration with a selected number of global partners, including:

- **World Health Organization (WHO)** on policies, regulations and standards on first foods and food supplements for young children in Africa.
- **World Food Programme (WFP)** on procurement, distribution and use of first foods and food supplements for children affected by humanitarian crises.

- **United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)** to increase African companies' access to financial capital and enable local production and promotion of first foods and food supplements.
- **World Bank Group (WBG)** to support public programmes that facilitate access by vulnerable children and families to the first foods and food supplements local companies will produce.

The **Child Nutrition Fund (CNF)** will be a key financial instrument to support UNICEF's First Foods Africa. The CNF will incentivize investments in medium-to-large African companies that are aligned with UNICEF criteria for engaging with the food industry. The CNF will facilitate financial access to funding for the technical support and programme actions needed to implement First Foods Africa across its three pillars.

## First Foods Africa

In Africa, for Africa, by Africa

First Foods Africa seeks to create systemic, sustainable transformation of food systems for children in Africa, bringing together public and private sector actors to increase the availability, affordability, and consumption of locally-produced nutritious first foods and food supplements for young children.

First Foods Africa aims to change production priorities, policy frameworks, and consumption practices so that every child receives the nutritious diets children need to grow and develop to their full potential. Finally and most importantly, First Foods Africa will contribute to sustainably reducing the prevalence of child food poverty and malnutrition in Africa, for Africa and by Africa.



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