

First Foods Africa

Tackling
child food
poverty and
malnutrition

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

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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.

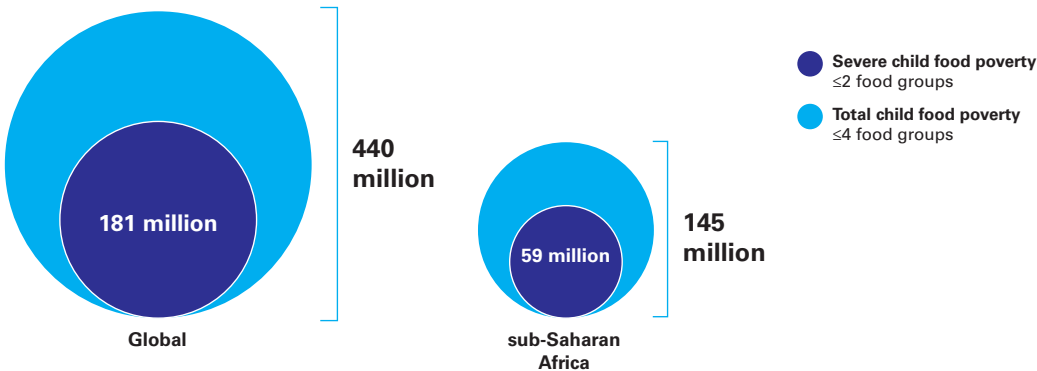
Child food poverty is the main driver of the persistently high rates of child undernutrition in sub-Saharan Africa – including **stunting** and **wasting** in early childhood – which affect more than one-third of children under 5 years of age (*Figure 1*).

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

Source: UNICEF Child Nutrition Report 2024



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 underfunded and overloaded, failing to provide families with the essential nutrition services, counselling and support needed by children; **social protection systems** are failing to provide income-poor families with safety nets to make nutritious first foods accessible and affordable to the most vulnerable children.

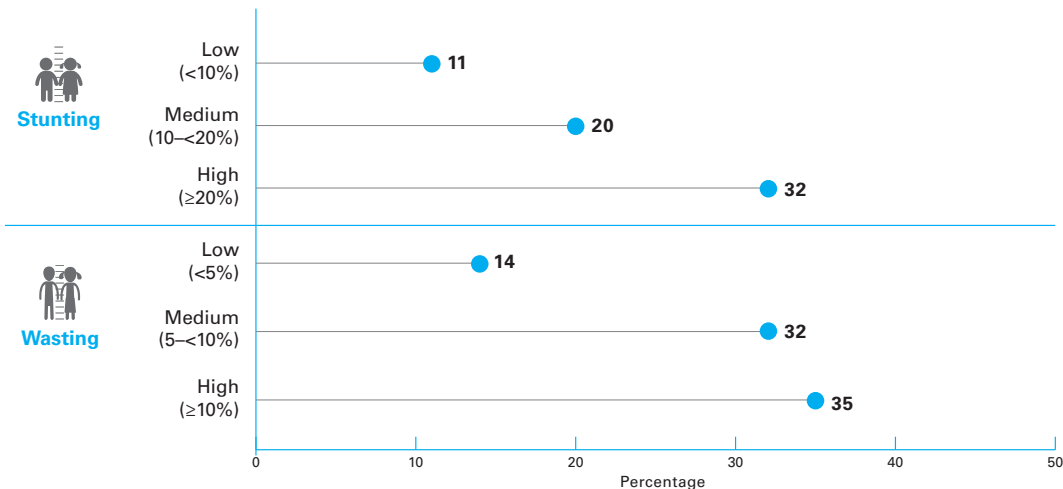
Traditional and current food security initiatives do not account for children's unique nutrient

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. UNICEF is uniquely positioned to drive this food system transformation – in partnership with national governments, regional institutions, 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 supports local production and consumption of nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods 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 is a central component of the UNICEF Africa Strategy, contributing to the African Union Agenda 2063, for an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa. First Foods Africa aims to respond to child food poverty and malnutrition by:

- **Incentivizing local production** of nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods in Africa, by Africa, for Africa, through principle-driven partnerships between public and private leaders and stakeholders who are committed to addressing child food poverty and malnutrition, 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 through market-based and social protection approaches, improving food standards, guidelines, and policies, including fiscal policies, and strengthening social protection programmes for the most vulnerable families.
- **Stimulating adequate consumption** of nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods, through large-scale social and behaviour change programmes and social marketing, to increase demand for locally produced first foods, making them the aspirational, trusted and accessible choice for caregivers.

First Foods Africa focuses on five types of first foods, including food supplements

Complementary foods	Packaged nutritious and safe complementary foods comprising cereal grains, animal/plant source protein, vitamins and essential micronutrients for young children.
Food ingredients	Minimally-processed foods such as dried powders made of a single food (egg, fish, legumes, nuts, etc.) that can be added to home-prepared complementary foods and young children's portion of the family meal.
Food snacks	Nutrient-dense, safe, and palatable snacks that can be used as a complement to home-prepared foods for young children.
Food supplements	SQ-LNS to enrich home-prepared complementary foods with energy and essential micronutrients.
Micronutrient powders	MNPs containing essential micronutrients for home-based fortification of home-prepared foods for young children.

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

Pillars	Actions
Incentivizing local production	Increase market availability and affordability of nutritious, safe, sustainable and appropriate first foods specifically designed for young children.
	Procure and effectively to deliver nutritious, safe and sustainable first foods for vulnerable children in fragile and humanitarian settings in a timely manner.
Shaping policy environments	Strengthen national and regional standards, laws and regulations for the formulation, promotion and distribution of first foods for young children.
	Strengthen social protection systems to increase access to nutritious first foods for young children from vulnerable, income-poor families.
Stimulating consumption	Support social marketing actions to make locally-produced nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods desirable to families and communities.
	Support social and behaviour change to create positive social norms and help families feed their young children locally-produced nutritious first foods.

First Foods Africa

Initial Focus

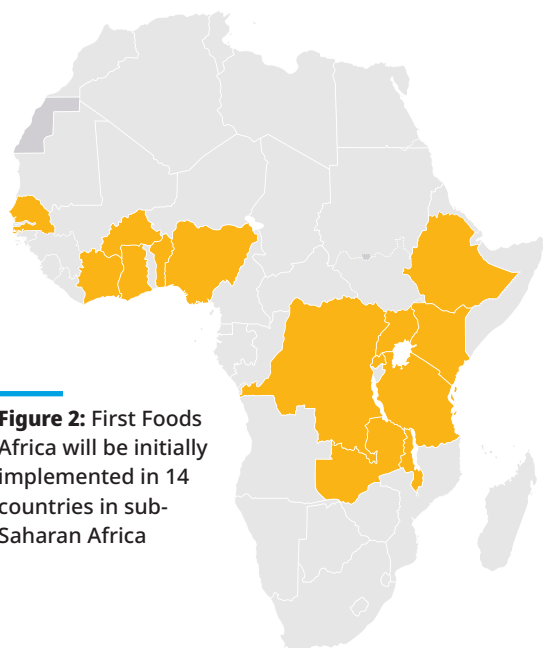


Figure 2: First Foods Africa will be initially implemented in 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa

First Foods Africa will initially be implemented in 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa with some of the most significant challenges in terms of child food poverty and malnutrition, and opportunities in terms of local production. These include seven countries in West and Central Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal; and seven countries in Eastern and Southern Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

Expected Impact on Children

First Foods Africa primarily targets children living in severe food poverty and at high risk of malnutrition and poor growth and development, prioritizing investment for:

- The **youngest**: children aged 6–23 months,
- The **poorest**: those from income-poor families, and
- The **most vulnerable**: children in fragile or humanitarian settings.

The initiative seeks a sustainable transformation of food systems to benefit the **122 million** children under five years living in the 14 phase 1 countries. By fostering principle-driven partnerships between public and private actors, it will contribute to change production priorities, policy frameworks, and consumption practices so that all children can access nutritious diets.

First Foods Africa goal is ambitious: a ~10% reduction in child food poverty in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030, meaning 15 million fewer African children growing up in deprivation. Addressing child food poverty contributes to reducing child malnutrition in Africa and to reaching the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals nutrition targets.

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 contributes 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 supports 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 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 associated with biodiversity loss, high greenhouse gas emissions 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 fosters Africa-owned public-private partnerships. UNICEF is working primarily with national and local governments, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the African Union and potential 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.

Furthermore, UNICEF is building on its longstanding collaboration with key global partners, including UN Agencies – FAO, IFAD, UNCDF, UNIDO, WHO, WFP, the World Bank Group, Development Partners and Financial Institutions such as the African Development Bank.

The resources needed to deliver First Foods Africa include programmatic costs to implement activities across the three pillars, and capital

investment to incentivize African companies to produce nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods. Programmatic costs in 14 countries in Africa have been estimated at about US\$250 million. Initial investment costs have been estimated at US\$50 million. The total cost of First Foods Africa is US\$300 million or an estimated average of about US\$20 million per country.

The **Child Nutrition Fund** (CNF) is a key financial instrument to support UNICEF's First Foods Africa. The CNF aims to 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, accessibility, affordability, and consumption of locally produced nutritious, safe, affordable and sustainable first foods 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.



A multi-pronged approach will ensure that nutritious and safe first foods reach all children, regardless of their economic situation or the context in which they live.

unicef  | for every child