HUNGER IN A WAR ZONE

THE GROWING CRISIS BEHIND THE SYRIA CONFLICT

Save the Children

"THIS WHOLE WAR IS A WAR ON CHILDREN. LACK OF FOOD, LACK OF WATER, SHELLS – THEY ALL KILL CHILDREN FIRST."

AHMAD, FATHER OF TWO-YEAR-OLD ZEINA

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All names of children and parents who shared their stories have been changed to protect identities.

Front cover: Zeina, two, at her home in a tented refugee settlement in Lebanon, near the Syrian border. Her father, Ahmad, has taken part in Save the Children's Cash for Work programme, and used the money he has earned on food and water for his family.

Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

A MESSAGE TO THE WORLD

"This is a message from the Syrian people to world leaders. I am 13 years old and I am Syrian. I am Ali.

"I want to talk about the tragedy that we have in Syria.

"In Syria, we had no good food and not enough water. We only had lentils. So we ate lentils every day.

"We would see wounded people and dead bodies every day in the street, and the many children who did not have homes. They were living in schools. But now they don't even have a school to live in.

"I am asking the leaders of the world to provide us with safe shelter, food, water, medicine – this is all we ask.

"Please, please, please – help us."

ALI, 13 YEARS OLD

A PLEA FROM THE HEART

"We are talking to the people of your country, not the government. The people. To see how we are living. The children of Syria are dying. Put yourselves in our shoes. We are humans. We respect humanity. We respect humans.

"We are talking to the citizens, to the people. How everyone, especially mothers, feel when their children sleep healthy and full of food, while our children are hungry or sick. How do you feel about that? The father when he goes to sleep feeling desperate because he cannot afford to feed his children, while the child in your country sleeps full.

"We are people. We are dying because of hunger. We are dying for lack of healthcare. Just empathise with us as humans. We have nothing to do with the war – we do not like war. We respect humanity in all the regions of the world. We are talking to you, asking you for help, as humans. No more. No less."

BASSAM, FATHER

1. THE GROWING CRISIS BEHIND THE SYRIA CONFLICT

War in Syria has claimed thousands of children's lives. Millions more are still inside Syria, caught in a conflict not of their own making, a conflict that is destroying the means of sustaining life: food, water, healthcare.

Two and a half years of conflict is shattering an entire country. The conflict has set Syria back 35 years and imposed an economic cost of more than $84bn, equivalent to over 140% of Syria's pre-war GDP.[1]

The situation is bleak for families trying to feed their children. The United Nations (UN) says that 4 million Syrians – half of them children – are in need of emergency food assistance.[2] An assessment by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) puts these numbers higher still, finding that 10.5 million people need assistance in seven governorates alone.[3] As the destruction continues, these numbers will grow: children who once relied on three healthy meals a day will go to bed hungry, afraid, feeling abandoned by the world outside. The UN has already reported children dying due to malnutrition and lack of medical support.[4]

As world leaders gather in New York for the UN General Assembly, Syrian children and parents demand action: they need the fighting that is devastating their country to end. However, even before that happens, they, their friends and families inside Syria must get the food, water, and essential medical supplies and support they desperately need. These life-saving essentials are their right.

This briefing brings the voices of some of those Syrians into the corridors of the UN so that they are not forgotten or ignored. It also carries a stark warning: not only is the international community failing to bring a peaceful end to this conflict, we are compounding that failure by neglecting to address its dreadful consequences effectively. Restrictions on movement and massive inflation are severely limiting the ability of many Syrian families to put enough food on the table. In huge swathes of the country – some 79% of surveyed sub-districts – people are facing tremendous difficulty in accessing humanitarian relief.[5] This is unacceptable. If we do not ensure that people in Syria get the food, basic supplies, and support they need, we will be condemning more children to hunger on top of the horrors of war.

The following sections outline the growing hunger crisis in Syria, the challenges to getting humanitarian aid to families who need it, and the steps that Save the Children believes are needed to overcome those challenges.

Right: A child plays in the dirt in a tented refugee settlement in Lebanon, near the Syrian border.

Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

2. HUNGER: A NEW THREAT TO SYRIA'S CHILDREN

"I knew that if we stayed our children would die. I knew this because all around us children were dying. Whole families were dying.

"At the worst point we were hiding in our basement, unable to move. It was dark because the electricity had been cut. There was no phone network, so we knew nothing of the outside world. There was very little food and water and what there was quickly ran out. No-one could come into our village with supplies and no civilians could escape, either. My son, in those four days underground, ate only half a piece of bread and drank only two glasses of water. Then everything ran out.

"We had a baby with us, my granddaughter Safaa. My daughter wanted to stop breastfeeding her when she was one year old, but she would cry so loudly. We had seen before that when a baby cries, it attracts the attention of the armed men. They come to find the baby and kill the whole family, or they shoot at the house. We were so afraid. Every time she cried my daughter quickly breastfed her, so she would not kill us all.

"Every day more families joined us in the basement after their homes were destroyed in the onslaught. Luckily it was a large basement – almost a whole floor of the house. By the end there were over 100 people there, still with no food or water. It was desperate.

"There are still many families inside. They can't move, they can't leave. There's nothing for them. Shops are looted and supplies cannot get in. There is no medicine, no food, no clean water. They can't get to the farms to take any fruit or potatoes that are left. No-one can enter the town to bring supplies. So those families are already dead."

JAMILA, GRANDMOTHER ON SYRIA'S BORDER

Left: When their town came under attack, three-year-old Safaa and her family hid in their basement for safety. But when their supplies of food and water ran out they had to flee.

"THIS IS AGONY. I CANNOT DESCRIBE TO YOU, YOU WHO HAVE NOT YET SEEN THIS WITH YOUR OWN EYES. IT IS BEYOND IMAGINING."

ROHA, MOTHER OF SIX-YEAR-OLD HYAT ON SYRIA'S BORDER

Before 2011, 8 million Syrians depended for their income on farming.[6] The conflict has caused nearly $2bn of agricultural damage, including loss of crops, livestock and agricultural infrastructure.[7] With fighting raging in areas, such as those to the east of Aleppo, that were once the country's breadbasket, there is now less food: despite good rains, 2013 was the worst harvest since a major drought nearly 30 years ago.[8] In some areas half the bakeries have been put out of action by the conflict.[9] Food stocks are running out. What's left is rationed over months – or ransacked in minutes.[10]

With many families unable to move, their resources running out, their currency rapidly depreciating, and markets hit by the devastating impact of the fighting, hunger is now a grave threat facing Syria's children. Increasing numbers of families have to rely on food assistance from humanitarian agencies.[11] Syrian parents cite lack of food as their second most important source of stress as caregivers, just behind the pervasive lack of security.[12]

Homs, Aleppo, Idleb, Damascus: cities in the news for the violence ravaging their streets. Appalling abuses are being inflicted on the civilian population, as we have described in previous reports, Untold Atrocities and Childhood Under Fire. But there is another human crisis behind this destruction – one that the rest of the world does not see. Areas in these cities have been encircled by violence or deliberately besieged. In these areas alone, nearly two million people have been trapped, unable to access food, afraid to drink the water, terrified of what might happen if the wrong people hear their baby crying.[13]

Even outside these besieged cities, children across the country are deprived of the basics for survival. Food is becoming scarce, expensive, and risky to access; and efforts to address these challenges are falling dangerously short. Children are already paying the price. While the lack of access for aid workers means there are no comprehensive data, the indications are that children in some areas, such as Rural Damascus, are facing malnutrition.[14] One UN report found that thirteen children died in one health centre in Syria due to malnutrition and lack of medication.[15]

Photo: AP Photo/Manu Brabo

Buildings damaged by shelling in Aleppo, Syria.

Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

Maya, 11 months, left Syria with her family after surviving for months in a town under siege. Supplies ran out and Maya became very malnourished. Now she lives in a disused industrial building near the Syrian border.

A BLASTED FOOD BASKET

"We used to live in the suburbs of a big city. Our whole area was under siege. No one could come in or go out. No food or water was allowed in.

"As supplies of food dwindled, we had to rely on dry food such as rice, beans and flour. There were no vegetables at all. But soon even the dried foods ran out.

"My baby's sick now. I think it's because she's not eating properly, and because of the hunger she faced in Syria."

RASHA, MOTHER OF ONE-YEAR-OLD MAYA ON SYRIA'S BORDER

The devastation caused by the conflict has forced almost 7 million people into poverty.[16] Deprived of their income and assets, and with food prices rocketing, thousands of parents have been pitched from lives of relative comfort into destitution. While inflation is estimated to be around 50%, food-price inflation is as high as 100%.[17] Impoverished by the conflict and faced with this rampant inflation, 40% of families across seven governorates report that they lack enough food; what used to be a comfortable state salary is now insufficient to buy enough basic food for families in areas like Deir-ez-Zor.[18]

With food so scarce and so expensive, half of an average family's expenditure is now on on basic food.[19] This is already proving unsustainable for many families. According to one survey, one family in five is spending over a week a month without any food in the house because they cannot afford any.[20] More and more families are sinking into destitution and debt, selling off what little they still have and sliding nearer the point when they simply cannot feed their children.[21]

FINDING FOOD IN THE LINE OF FIRE

"This war…is killing people slowly. We had to flee Syria – there was no fuel, no electricity, no water. It was so cold over winter. When I moved, it was snowing – my children were freezing, it was deadly.

"We were trapped there for weeks. It was too dangerous for aid agencies: anyone moving in the street would be shot, there were snipers all over. No-one could move around to deliver food, or water. It was a miracle we survived in that place. We used up all our supplies of food – I could only give my children one or two mouthfuls of rice to keep them going. I just cried at night.

"We would turn on the tap, and nothing would come out. No water. Instead, over winter, we collected the snow from the roof, to melt for drinking water. We turned it into a game. How else do you explain that to your children? My children are only three years and ten months, they don't understand.

"Please – I want the world to feel us, to have compassion, to listen to these stories of our lives and our suffering.

"To know that no-one wants to leave their home. We were living a normal life – we had houses, jobs, shops, warehouses. Now we have lost everything, we have nothing. I just want the people outside to know that we were just like you."

ISRA, SYRIA BORDER

Even where there is food available, Syrians – and other groups still trapped in the country, like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians – face an appalling choice: slide into hunger or put themselves in the line of fire. There are widespread reports of people being targeted while queuing for bread, making the search for food all the more terrifying.[22] As Amjad told Save the Children, while people used to shop in supermarkets and local stores, even trips to these familiar places are now filled with fear: "The shelling happened every day… It was not always day or night, you never knew when it would happen. The clashes between the armed groups would happen all the time, too; shooting everywhere. It was impossible to go and find food."

Photo: Nicole Itano/Save the Children

Residents of Za'atari refugee camp wait for bread.

Photo: Jonathan Hyams/Save the Children

Laila, age one, is being treated for malnutrition at a Save the Children-supported health clinic on the Syria border.

QUALITY AS WELL AS QUANTITY

"When Laila was born she was small – too small. And she hardly cried at all… She is now one year old, and she looks nothing like the babies who were born here [on Syria's borders]. Look, see her legs and how thin they still are. She is still suffering for what we went through in Syria. Other babies are crawling at her age, but she still just lies there. I think there may be permanent damage, but at least now she is eating more.

"I am afraid that Laila might never have a normal life."

REEM, MOTHER OF LAILA

For a baby or young child to have a fair chance at life, she or he needs nutrients and proper care. Breastfeeding prevents malnutrition, illness, and saves lives, especially in emergencies, yet breastfeeding mothers are not receiving the critical support they need, and neither are those infants that are not breastfed.[23] As babies grow they also require safe and appropriate complementary foods in order to meet their nutrient requirements, yet with limited means, children are being deprived of the essentials for survival and proper development. Syria's children are in great danger: at risk of dying for lack of the right nutrients, of becoming acutely malnourished in a place where health workers have little experience in treating malnutrition, and of developing chronic malnutrition, which will have lifelong detrimental consequences if it isn't addressed by the time they are two. Without immediate preventive action and support, Syria will slide into a malnutrition crisis.

Without enough food, and enough of the right food, children in Syria face a future of hunger and weakness in a shattered country. With the health, water and sanitation systems being wrecked, children are at mounting risk of disease.

A recent assessment found that the sewage system is nearing breaking point. In many areas, infrastructure has already been destroyed and cannot be repaired due to the danger and the lack of spare parts, so human waste is being discharged into rivers and reservoirs.[24] The result is a shortage of clean water and growing risks of communicable diseases such as hepatitis, typhoid, and dysentery: the number of cases of acute diarrhoea rocketed by 172% in just five months in 2013.[25] The health system is crumbling as the conflict continues: in some areas, over 70% of Syria's trained health workers are unable to get to work due to insecurity or roadblocks. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has warned that dozens of Syrians are dying every day because of limited access to healthcare and shortages of essential medical supplies.[26] Even as the situation for children rapidly deteriorates, the basic safety net is being cut away.

3. DENIED ACCESS

"When we were in Syria, under siege, we ran out of everything.

"Before the siege we were doing well. We were farmers, so we had everything – bread, milk, meat, yoghurt.

"But during the siege nothing was available. The children were crying for food and water, and if they got sick there were no doctors, no medicines and no food. You would watch your child getting sicker and sicker and there's nothing you could do about it.

"No one could leave, no one could enter. What little food was available was very expensive – bread used to be around 15 SYP (Syrian pounds), but the price jumped to 300, then 500 SYP. People were starving. They shared the last handful of flour to make bread.

"We've never experienced a food shortage like this. We would feed the children anything we could find – leaves, nuts, fruits – just to fill up their bellies. I had to give my whole family dirty water to drink. Because of that they got sick and they suffered from terrible diarrhoea. They became dehydrated and weak.

"When we left our village and were on the road there was no food or water at all. I fed my children raw potatoes that we found. There was no water to cook them in, and we couldn't light a fire because we might be seen and shot or shelled.

"The children cried when they slept with empty bellies. They went to sleep hungry and woke up hungry. It's the children who suffered the most."

ROULA, MOTHER

The first assistance that Syrians receive is from their family and communities. Syrian children and parents tell Save the Children powerful stories of generosity and heroism, of people helped to safety and of food morsels shared. As we have seen, though, the capacity of Syrians to support each other has been overwhelmed by their mounting needs: according to UN figures, 6.8 million people need help – one Syrian in three. An assessment in May found the need may be much greater, with 10.5 million people needing assistance in seven governorates alone – two thirds of these areas' population.[27]

Right: A refugee child in Iraq. Most refugees did not manage to bring any belongings with them when they fled Syria but some children managed to save a favourite teddy bear or doll.

Photo: Rob Holden/Save the Children

Independent humanitarian agencies are working tirelessly to reach people caught up in the conflict. The UN, working with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and national and international NGO partners, is able to operate from Damascus, and is gradually increasing its presence throughout the country.[28] Save the Children and our partners have been able to reach 230,000 people so far. Up to 3.4m people have received vital food supplies from UN agencies and NGOs.[29] However, one assessment found that nearly a quarter of localities had not received any food assistance in the last month, and the majority of the rest had only received a 'one-off' distribution.[30] In August, the World Food Programme was only able to dispatch food for 2.4 million people – falling badly short of its goal of feeding 3 million people a month.[31] It reported that many parts of the country are becoming inaccessible with the upsurge in violence and the proliferation of checkpoints around major cities and road closures. The international community must be honest with Syrians: our combined efforts fall far short of the escalating humanitarian need. This must change.

Where a state is unable or unwilling to meet the humanitarian need of its population, its government, and other parties controlling territory within its borders, have the duty to allow impartial assistance from the international community.[32] So far, for millions in Syria, this is not happening. Areas that are home to over 10 million people face huge challenges: either aid agencies cannot get in or civilians are unable to access the relief.[33]

This denial of humanitarian assistance to people caught up in the conflict is intolerable; but it is not inevitable. In the largest, highest-profile humanitarian emergency of our time, only $2 has been provided for every $5 of assistance that's needed – a gap of over $800m.[34] The warring parties have targeted aid workers: 18 have been killed so far in the conflict, 21 more injured, and more still – the exact number is unknown – kidnapped.[35] This is a deplorable breach of international humanitarian law. The UN is severely limited in its efforts to reach across the lines of conflict to civilians in areas not controlled by the government. Once humanitarian convoys do have permission to travel the 310km from Damascus to Aleppo – Syria's largest city, 60km from Syria's northern border – they must navigate 50 checkpoints to do so.[36] Between January and July 2013, only 21 UN convoys were able to overcome these kinds of constraints and complete the treacherous journey across conflict lines.[37] As a result of this and the limited amount of aid coming from other routes, an assessment earlier this year found that fewer than half of the 2.4m people in need in Aleppo had received any assistance.[38]

The UN continues to report that humanitarian agencies are facing delays in getting staff and essential equipment into the country, constraining the number of people they can reach with essential aid.[39] A limited number of international and local NGOs are working in Syria, either from Damascus or from bases elsewhere. While the context varies throughout the country, they face similar constraints of bureaucracy and widespread insecurity. The warring parties have a responsibility to allow humanitarian access for civilian populations; the international community must oblige them to do this.

4. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

"NO ONE IS HELPING AND WE'RE DYING. IF THERE WAS EVEN 1% OF HUMANITY IN THE WORLD, THIS WOULDN'T HAPPEN."

WAEL, 17 YEARS OLD

For the sake of the millions of children facing a future of fear and hunger, safe and unimpeded humanitarian access is needed to all areas of Syria by the most effective routes possible.

The UN humanitarian chief, Valerie Amos, has repeatedly raised the immense challenges to humanitarian access with the UN Security Council in the strongest terms, powerfully urging the Council to consider new measures so more aid can get to the millions who need it. In her words, 'too many lives are being lost.'[40]

We are facing the largest humanitarian crisis of our time. Words are important but action is vital.

Save the Children is calling for:

- **World leaders to use the platform of the UN General Assembly to speak out for Syria's children and demand that humanitarian aid be enabled to reach all parts of the country where children need it**
- **The UN Security Council to unite around measures to secure full, safe, and unimpeded access to all areas of Syria by the most effective routes**
- **International donors to increase support for humanitarian operations throughout all of Syria by any possible channel, as well as scaling up support for refugees and host communities in neighbouring countries**
- **The UN Secretary General to find ways to increase UN support for a humanitarian response that covers the whole of Syria, including those areas where the UN itself is not based**
- **Syria's neighbours to keep borders open and to work with the UN and humanitarian agencies to ensure a reliable humanitarian supply chain for operations in Syria, including facilitating aid across borders where delivering aid through other routes is not possible or effective**
- **All parties to the conflict to allow and facilitate the effective and safe passage of aid to all populations in need, including easing bureaucratic constraints and agreeing on priority humanitarian routes across conflict lines or borders if needed.**

ENDNOTES

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39 See, for instance, Under Secretary-General Valerie Amos' address to the UN Security Council in July. Transcript available at http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/USG%20Security%20Council%20Briefing%20on%20Syria%2016Jul2013.pdf, last checked 9th August 2013

40 Under Secretary-General Valerie Amos' address to the UN Security Council in April, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/USG%20Amos%20Security%20Council%20on%20Syria%2018%20April%202013%20CAD.pdf, last checked 9th August 2013; see also Reuters (2013) 'U.N. aid chief sends Security Council ideas to ease aid distribution in Syria', www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/06/us-syria-crisis-un-aid-idUSBRE9750YL20130806, last checked 16th August 2013

"NO ONE IS HELPING US. WHEN WE ARE UNDER SIEGE IN SYRIA, THERE ARE NO AID ORGANISATIONS WHO ARE ABLE TO HELP US. WE TRIED TO HELP THE INJURED BUT THEY JUST DIED."

MOHAMMED, FATHER ON SYRIA'S BORDER

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