



Food Insecurity: Impact on Education Outcomes

Information Brief



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Girls' Education Challenge





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Food Insecurity and Education

Recent projections are showing that the world is not on track to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2, Zero Hunger by 2030, and people are more food insecure than ever. When food insecure households have to make decisions on how to use their limited resources, children's schooling, especially girls' access to education, often becomes a casualty. Furthermore, the limited access to nutritious food contributes to reduced cognitive ability in children, negatively affecting learning outcomes for those who are enrolled in school.

Since early 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic has further worsened food insecurity. The pandemic did not only spark a health crisis, but also an economic crisis as result of lockdowns, and restrictions in movements and activities. The income of those who relied on casual labor fell; disturbances to global logistics networks limited access to food and agricultural inputs and increased prices. Many families lost their earning members, as they were forced to leave homes in search of livelihood, exposing them further to the virus. In parallel, COVID-enforced school closures caused an increase in learning losses and dropouts, especially among girls. In many contexts, girls were more prone to dropping out of school due to the gendered burden of household chores and the decline of the family's economic situation, as well as the prioritization of the use of existing resources for boys' education.

School closures during COVID-19 have aggravated an already existing global learning crisis to unprecedented levels. The World Bank has predicted that learning losses may increase up to ten percentage points due to the impact of the pandemic, at a **global cost of \$16 trillion in lost income for this generation of students.**¹ Besides missing content and teacher support during school closures, an estimated 370 million children have also missed school meals at a time when food insecurity had dramatically increased at household level.² For the most marginalized students, particularly those living in severely food insecure contexts, **the escalation of undernutrition is likely to further compromise their ability to recover from COVID-19 learning losses. An integrated response is urgently needed, bringing together education, food security, and economic empowerment interventions.**

This brief report attempts to shed a light in the current global food insecurity status, its impact on children's cognitive development, and some of CARE's promising practices which are showing results on reducing the impact of food insecurity on education outcomes.

Global Food Insecurity

Prior to the pandemic, the size of the global undernourished population was slowly declining; coming down from 810 million from 2020 to an estimated 650 million in 2019. In 2020, this figure had increased to 768 million people.³ In 2021, around 2.3 billion people in the world were moderately or severely food insecure and 11.7 percent of the global population faced severe food insecurity.⁴ Hunger affected 46 million more people⁵ in 2021 compared to 2020, with a total increase of 150 million in relation to 2019.⁶ Projections indicate that nearly 670 million people will be undernourished by 2030, out of whom 435 million will be in Asia and 278 million in Africa.⁷

Countries already severely affected by food insecurity before COVID are experiencing some of the worse impact of the ongoing crisis. Prior to the pandemic, the island country of **Timor-Leste** had some of the highest malnutrition rates globally, with 47 percent of the children under five stunted and 32 percent underweight.⁸ CARE implements the HATUTAN program, funded by USDA's [McGovern-Dole Food for Education and Child Nutrition initiative](#), in some of the worst-affected rural and remote areas of Timor-Leste. CARE's research showed that among assessed women of childbearing age, dietary diversity had declined from 3.3 in 2019 to 2.7 in 2021, while **the proportion of children ages 6-23 months consuming a minimum acceptable diet decreased from six percent in 2019 to four percent in 2021.**⁹

In **Somalia**, due to the compounding impacts of extended drought, flooding, locust infestations, the COVID-19 pandemic, and conflict, an estimated 5.2 million people, or 33 percent of the country's total population, are currently facing a food security crisis.¹⁰ As of May 2022, **1.5 million Somali children under the age of five – or 45 percent of the total population under five – were estimated to be facing acute malnutrition** through the end of the year, including 386,400 who were likely to be severely malnourished.¹¹

CARE's research in Somalia shows that the **food insecurity faced by adolescent girls living in conflict-affected areas has reached dramatic levels – and even more so for marginalized populations.** A survey conducted in early 2022 by CARE's AGES project, funded by FCDO and USAID, found that **70 percent of the adolescent girls under the age of 18 had gone to sleep hungry at least once, with higher proportions among the internally displaced (77 percent) and minority clans or ethnic groups (80 percent).**¹² Among female youth ages 18-25, 67 percent had gone to sleep hungry at least once, including 84 percent of those from minority groups and 79 percent of the internally displaced.¹³ Among the same female youth, 69 percent reported lacking reliable access to water, increasing to 82 percent among those from minority clans or ethnic groups.¹⁴ Only 21 percent of female youth reported receiving some form of humanitarian assistance; this proportion

dropped to 19 percent among minority groups.¹⁵

Food Insecurity and Cognitive Development

Nutrition plays a critical role in brain development

Cognitive development depends on the interplay of numerous factors, including environmental stimulation, social interactions, and nutrition, among others. Nutrition plays a key role in brain development, more so at a younger age, especially during the first 1,000 days of age.¹⁶ Globally, 250 million children under the age of five, or 43 percent, are growing up in extreme poverty and are at risk of not reaching their full physical and cognitive potential.¹⁷ In 2020, an estimated 149 million or 22 percent of the children under five were stunted, while 45 million or 6.7 percent faced wasting.¹⁸



Diverse, nutrient-rich diets can boost the development of cognitive abilities in young children © Timothy Buckley/CARE

A student's academic performance depends on the development of cognitive abilities, including working memory, and reasoning / problem-solving.¹⁹ Working memory is the ability to recall information sustained for specific periods of time,²⁰ and is essential for reading comprehension, enabling children to remember the content they have read.²¹ Research shows that **student working memory is negatively affected by short-term hunger.**²²

The evaluation of CARE's HATUTAN program in Timor-Leste has shown that **students who had eaten on the day of the assessment had significantly higher self-reported attentiveness.**²³ Living in a household

where respondents had not eaten for at least an entire day during the previous month predicted a decline of two percentage points in students' working memory.²⁴ The evaluation also indicated that **students' higher dietary diversity predicted significantly higher literacy scores.**²⁵

Promising Practices: CARE's Learning from the Field

CARE works to increase access to quality education and learning outcomes among marginalized children and adolescents, particularly girls living in fragile and conflict-affected settings. CARE is currently reaching more than 3 million people in 52 countries through its education programming. Mitigating the impact of food insecurity on learning outcomes is a key part of our work, particularly among the most vulnerable: Displaced children, minority groups, those living in remote areas, children with disabilities and other discriminated/underserved subgroups.

Promoting School Feeding Programs

In Timor-Leste, CARE is working with the government to boost the impact of the national School Feeding Program. CARE's HATUTAN program operates in 445 remote and rural schools in the most vulnerable areas of the country, providing school meals to 80,806 children to enhance their learning, health, and nutrition outcomes. Among the children supported by HATUTAN, 33 percent are minority language speakers and 35 percent face some type of cognitive disability.²⁶

The program also boosts household economic development and knowledge of nutrition and hygiene, having increased **the proportion of students who had eaten anything at all before coming to school by 5.7 percentage points, compared to only 0.6 points in comparison schools.**



Students enjoying the school meal provided in a HATUTAN supported school in Timor-Leste © Saikat Saha/ CARE

In Haiti, the USAID-funded Vouchering School Feeding Program (VSFP) supported 4,200 students to receive nutritious hot lunches and snacks through an innovative partnership with female vendors and education authorities. VSFP's evaluation indicated that the program's school canteen and WASH components have a positive impact on the students' school performance and hygiene practices. VSFP **significantly improved the retention rate by 13 percentage points (from 86% to 99%)²⁷ and reduced the repetition rate by 6 percentage points (from 27% to 21%).²⁸**

In Indonesia, CARE partners with Danone to implement *Warung Anak Sehat* (Healthy Kiosks for Kids) in 350 schools across four provinces of the country. *Warung Anak Sehat* trains female snack vendors and teachers on nutrition and hygiene requirements for school feeding. The project also provides financial literacy and business training to female vendors, empowering them to succeed as entrepreneurs. **The program has contributed to significantly increase vendors' income and resulted in nearly 90 percent selling milk in school kiosks.**

In Somalia, CARE has supported the federal government to track the impact of school feeding programs on student learning outcomes. Somalia's first sub-national assessment of student learning outcomes, conducted by CARE and the Federal Ministry of Education in 2021, showed that **access to school feeding was associated with an increase of 6 percentage points in reading comprehension scores and 3 percentage points in math scores.²⁹** Still, only 26 percent of the Somali students in grades 1-4 had access to a school meal, despite high rates of food insecurity.³⁰ **The proportion of Somali students in early primary grades who had not eaten anything before coming to school was twice as high among students with disabilities: 15 percent, compared to seven percent among those without disabilities.³¹** Among Somali students who did not eat before coming to school, 24 percent felt too sleepy to pay attention at class, compared to 11 percent among those who had eaten at home.³² The final evaluation of CARE's [SOMGEP-T](#) project has shown that adolescent girls in rural areas of Somalia who had **access to a school feeding program had significantly higher working memory scores, which predict higher literacy and numeracy scores.³³**

Making National School Feeding Programs More Effective

CARE's HATUTAN program has advocated with the government of Timor-Leste to address recurrent delays in the disbursement of funds to schools to purchase food for meals. In January 2022, the government of Timor-Leste issued a new decree-law (13/2022) which shifted the funding modality used for school meals and enabled the Ministry of Finance to transfer funds to municipalities to **start the School Feeding Program much earlier than in previous years.** The faster transfer of funding to schools will increase the efficiency and

effectiveness of the SFP, enabling students to receive meals since the beginning of the school year. A study conducted by HATUTAN in 2020 indicated that the average cost of a nutritious school meal was \$0.49 per student/day, compared to the \$0.25/child provided by the national School Feeding Program. HATUTAN has used the findings to advocate with the national government for an increased allocation, with successful results. In August 2022, the government of Timor-Leste increased the meal allowance to **42 cents per child**.

Integrating Gender Equal Practices

CARE puts women and girls' empowerment at the center of its programming, acknowledging that **gender inequality has a negative impact on access to resources and services for women, adolescent girls, and children**, including food and education.

In **Somalia**, girls are systematically lagging behind boys at all education levels. The gross enrolment rate remains extremely low: only 27 percent of the school-aged boys and 22 percent of girls attend primary school.³⁴ CARE's research found that **adolescent boys in rural areas of Somalia have significantly higher working memory scores compared to girls** - 58 percent and 53 percent - potentially reflecting the prioritization of household resources, including food, for boys.³⁵ A sub-national study conducted by CARE and the Ministry of Education indicated that the proportion of girls who had not eaten anything before coming to school stood at 8 percent, compared to 6 percent of the boys.

CARE's programming in Somalia seeks to address gender discrimination in households and at school and mitigate the impact of learning losses among those most affected by food insecurity. CARE's AGES program, which supports over 63,000 ultra-marginalized adolescent girls in conflict-affected areas of South Somalia, worked with parents to encourage gender-equitable practices at home while also training mothers on savings groups and reducing food insecurity. At the school level, AGES trained community education committees to create safe and supportive school environments for the most marginalized girls, and supported teachers to provide remedial support to girls who were struggling to learn basic numeracy and literacy.



Girls' groups in Somalia provide peer learning support for those who are struggling to acquire basic literacy and numeracy © CARE

The girls enrolled by AGES in formal school had an **increase of 30 percentage points in their literacy scores, surpassing the target by 11 percentage points, during the COVID-19 crisis**.³⁶ The **most food insecure girls reached a literacy score three percentage points higher than the general average** in the project's 2022 evaluation,³⁷ despite having scored two percentage points behind the average at the baseline.³⁸

Teaching Strategies to Mitigate Learning Losses

To mitigate learning losses caused by the combination of malnutrition and school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, CARE works with teachers to identify poor performing students and provide timely remedial support. Teachers are also trained in techniques to **facilitate the acquisition of literacy skills by students with poor working memory** and those who are struggling to pay attention in class. These techniques include **using games and interactive practices to boost student attention**, repeating content to reinforce acquisition, seeking to engage students who are not participating in class, and **providing remedial exercises tailored to the students' learning levels**. Additionally, CARE's programming also seeks to reduce the use of corporal punishment and verbal abuse in class. CARE's research shows that teachers tend to use violent discipline more often on poorly performing students, including those who are lagging behind due to mild cognitive

disabilities.

Timor-Leste's HATUTAN program has **increased the proportion of teachers providing remedial education from 23 percent in 2020³⁹ to 53 percent in 2022.⁴⁰** In parallel, the proportion of teachers who sought to engage non-participating students increased from 60 percent at the baseline to 71 percent in 2022.⁴¹ The proportion of teachers using games and exercises to engage students in literacy classes increased from 49 percent at the baseline to 65 percent at the midterm evaluation, while decreasing in comparison schools.⁴² The midterm evaluation has shown that **HATUTAN reduced learning losses in literacy by 50 percent in relation to the comparison group.⁴³**

In Somalia, the proportion of teachers providing remedial support to female students enrolled through the AGES program has increased from 40% to 60% in 2022.⁴⁴ The proportion of AGES teachers who sought to engage students who were not participating in class jumped from 48% to 63%.⁴⁵ The AGES midterm evaluation indicated that **female primary students supported by the program had a gain of 30 percentage points in their average literacy score, surpassing the project target by 10 percentage points.⁴⁶**



Somali women walk home with their savings boxes after a Village Savings and Loans Association (VSLA) group meeting. © Georgina Goodwin/ CARE

Promoting Economic Resiliency

CARE's community-based savings model is known as the [Village Savings and Loans Association \(VSLA\)](#). It creates self-managed and self-capitalized savings groups of 15-25 members to save money in a safe space, provide loans to its members and put part of their savings in a group-based emergency fund. VSLAs help members to have more liquid assets at hand to start and expand businesses, diversifying livelihoods, and to have funds to support basic needs such as nutritious food and education, as well as a safety net in case of an emergency.

Furthermore, VSLA meetings are used as a platform to discuss and raise awareness on various social issues that directly benefits children's wellbeing in the households, including gender-equitable behaviors, inclusive decision-making, and children's education and nutritional needs. Research conducted by CARE's SOMGEP-T project has shown a clear link between mothers participating in VSLAs and their daughters' learning outcomes in rural areas of Somalia. **Household participation in VSLAs predicted an increase of 3.1 percentage points in girls' English scores and 1.8 percentage point in overall learning outcomes.⁴⁷**

The Way Forward

Working to Increase Children's Protein Intake

Evidence from CARE's programs show that children's protein intake is directly affecting their learning outcomes. In Somalia, CARE observed the strongest negative impact of food insecurity on girls' learning outcomes among those with low protein intake. Overall, 22 percent of the adolescent girls in rural areas of Somalia had not consumed protein-rich foods on the day prior to the survey.⁴⁸ Adolescent girls who had not consumed protein-rich foods during the previous 24 hours had average literacy scores **11.5 percentage points lower compared to those who did consume protein** – specifically measuring at 44 percent compared to 55 percent.⁴⁹

Nutritious foods, in particular protein-rich foods, tend to be less affordable than cereals and processed foods

high in fat, ultimately resulting in poor households having a lower consumption of protein.⁵⁰ Protein is required to repair and build bodily tissue, to facilitate metabolic reactions and provide essential components for brain function, in addition to helping cells properly function for growth, and strengthening immune systems to fight off illnesses. Globally, a healthy diet costs on average five times more than a protein-poor, starch-rich diet.⁵¹ It is likely that the global escalation of food inflation will further erode household capacity to purchase protein-rich foods. As of August 2022, FAO's Dairy Price Index, which measures monthly average changes in the international prices, is 23 percent above last year's value, while the Meat Price Index registered an increase of eight percent compared to last year.⁵²

In Timor-Leste, most rural households consume a **protein-poor diet**, with only nine percent eating eggs, eight percent meat, and 11 percent nuts and/or beans.⁵³ Additionally, women and children tend to eat after men, and often have less access to 'high value' food, including protein-rich items.⁵⁴ Moving forward, there is a need to adapt the content of school meals to provide a higher proportion of protein, thus mitigating the impact of the low consumption at home, particularly in highly food insecure contexts. This is particularly critical at pre-primary and in early primary grades, boosting student capacity to acquire foundational literacy and numeracy skills.

Working Towards Financially Secure Households

A key reason for children to drop out of school is extreme poverty, which oftentimes pushes them toward work and child marriage. CARE's VSLA approach has evolved to provide a suite of comprehensive financial literacy and business skills to members of savings groups, so that they can start/ expand their businesses and make smart financial choices, boosting family income. Despite the major crisis in Somalia, parents engaged in VSLAs have managed to increase their average individual savings by 66 percent, with 42 percent of the members who took loans investing them in businesses.⁵⁵ Among those who started businesses, 74 percent are using the profit to pay for school fees for their daughters.⁵⁶

Ensuring Strengthened School Systems

Working with education systems to strengthen **safeguarding will further contribute to reduce the impact of crises on** children. In many parts of the world, the use of corporal punishment on students remains common, particularly against poorly performing children - often those who have lower attentiveness levels due to undernutrition. This includes not only ensuring the presence of functional reporting and redress systems at school, but also working with teachers to understand and adopt non-violent classroom management approaches. In Somalia, the proportion of teachers using corporal punishment against students who gave wrong answers in CARE-supported schools declined from 80% to 56%, following training and the implementation of reporting systems in those locations.⁵⁷

In parallel, there is also a need to address the mental health burden caused by persistent food insecurity, particularly on adolescent girls. Among adolescent girls attending CARE-supported schools in Somalia, 11 percent reported facing severe depression, but this proportion increases to 27 percent in areas where food insecurity has reached famine level.⁵⁸ The **provision of psychosocial first aid by teachers and female mentors** is a promising practice, helping students, particularly girls, to overcome the impact of mental health issues on education outcomes.

About CARE

Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE) is a major international humanitarian agency delivering emergency relief and long-term international development projects. CARE was founded in 1945

and today works in over 100 countries, reaching more than 90 million people through 1,300 projects. Education became a programmatic focus area in 1994 and currently reaching more than 3 million people from 52 countries in Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Europe.

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