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The Role of Governments in Ensuring Children's Food Security during Wartime

Fatemeh Sadeghinejad¹

1. Department of Public and International Law, Faculty of Law and Political Science, Allameh Tabataba'i University (ATU), Tehran, Iran.

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***Corresponding Author:**

Fatemeh Sadeghinejad

E-mail:

sadeghif564@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Armed conflicts disrupt essential services, worsen poverty and pose a significant threat to children's food security. Malnutrition among children during wartime can lead to long-term health and developmental issues. This study examines the vital role of governments in ensuring food access for children during conflicts, highlighting effective policies, interventions and challenges in mitigating hunger. A thematic synthesis was conducted to qualitatively analyze government-led initiatives aimed at ensuring sustainable food security for children. The review focused on policy frameworks, emergency food aid programs and international collaborations across three specific conflict-affected regions: South Sudan, Nigeria and Yemen. These regions were selected due to their prolonged humanitarian crises and diverse policy responses. Case studies from each region were examined to identify recurring themes, assess the effectiveness of interventions and highlight both successes and limitations in governmental approaches. Governments are crucial in tackling wartime food insecurity through emergency relief programs, school feeding schemes and partnerships with humanitarian organizations. However, logistical challenges, resource shortages and political instability often impede their effectiveness. Strategies such as decentralizing food distribution, mobilizing local food resources and integrating food security measures into post-conflict recovery plans have demonstrated promise in improving outcomes. Ensuring food security for children during wartime requires proactive government policies, efficient resource allocation and strengthened international cooperation. While short-term relief efforts are essential, long-term strategies aimed at building resilience and infrastructure are necessary to protect children's nutrition in crisis situations. Strengthening governance mechanisms and fostering collaboration between agencies can enhance the effectiveness of food security interventions during conflicts.

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Introduction

Armed conflict poses severe threats to societal stability, dismantling critical infrastructure, fragmenting social services and disrupting agricultural production and supply chains. These cascading effects intensify poverty and directly compromise access to food, with children bearing the brunt of nutritional deprivation. Children under five are particularly vulnerable due to their physiological sensitivity and dependence on adult care systems, which are often disrupted during crises. The long-term consequences of conflict-related malnutrition, such as stunting, cognitive impairment and increased mortality can entrench generational cycles of disadvantage and hinder national development (1-2).

Conflict disrupts food systems not only through physical destruction of farmlands, marketplaces and transport corridors, but also through strategic manipulation of hunger. Blockades, sieges and targeted displacement are frequently used by conflict actors to restrict access to food and health services (3). These conditions are exacerbated by inflation, economic collapse and volatility in food prices, disproportionately affecting children and marginalized households (4).

Governments hold a pivotal role in mitigating these effects through emergency nutrition interventions. However, the effectiveness of such interventions depends on institutional capacity, policy coherence and integration with humanitarian actors. Theoretical frameworks such as state capacity theory and resilience governance emphasize the importance of decentralized, adaptive systems that can respond to rapidly changing conflict dynamics (5-6). Empirical studies from Nigeria, Sudan and Ethiopia suggest that community-based therapeutic care, mobile nutrition units and cash-based transfers are more effective than centralized models in reaching vulnerable populations during crises (7-9).

Despite operational guidance from organizations like UNICEF and WHO, many state-led programs lack embedded accountability mechanisms and fail to adapt to local conditions. A systematic review by Khan et al. highlights the need for integrated nutrition-health systems and real-time

surveillance to improve outcomes in conflict-affected regions (10). Similarly, Sassi and Thakare argue that quantitative evaluations of government interventions remain limited and call for more rigorous assessments of policy design and implementation (11).

This study explores how state-led interventions can uphold children's right to adequate nutrition in wartime. It seeks to identify practical models, evaluate their limitations and extract lessons for future crisis response. The central research question is: How can governments ensure and enhance child food security during armed conflict? The hypothesis asserts that governments employing coordinated, multisectoral policies, leveraging local distribution channels, and international partnerships achieve superior outcomes in protecting children's nutritional status in crisis settings.

Ultimately, safeguarding children from the nutritional consequences of war is not merely a logistical challenge but a moral imperative rooted in human rights and global development goals. It requires sustained commitment, innovative policy design and transnational solidarity to ensure that children can thrive, even amid the most harrowing circumstances.

This study employed a qualitative synthesis of government-led nutrition interventions in conflict-affected regions, focusing on case studies from Nigeria, Yemen, and South Sudan. The selection of documents followed a structured screening process. Peer-reviewed academic articles, humanitarian reports and international policy frameworks published between 2000 and 2025 were retrieved using databases such as PubMed, JSTOR and Scopus. Inclusion criteria required that sources explicitly address government involvement in child nutrition during armed conflict, contain empirical data or policy evaluations and be available in English. Reports from organizations like UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP) were included only if they provided operational metrics or program evaluations.

Data extraction was conducted using a thematic coding framework. Each document was reviewed for content related to five predefined domains:

1. Emergency food assistance; 2. School feeding programs; 3. Policy integration; 4. Decentralized food distribution; 5. International collaboration. Within each domain, “effectiveness” was assessed using qualitative indicators such as program reach, continuity, adaptability to conflict dynamics and reported nutritional outcomes (e.g., reduction in wasting or stunting rates). Where available, quantitative metrics (e.g., coverage percentages, beneficiary counts) were recorded to triangulate findings.

Case studies were selected based on geographic diversity, relevance to the research question and availability of detailed program documentation. Cross-case comparison was used to identify recurring challenges and successful strategies. The synthesis aimed to extract actionable insights into how governments can uphold children’s right to adequate nutrition during armed conflict, while acknowledging contextual limitations and data gaps.

1. Government Emergency Relief and Coordination in Conflict Zones

During armed conflicts, government-led emergency relief programs are vital lifelines for children facing severe acute malnutrition. These interventions, often executed in collaboration with international agencies and humanitarian organizations, aim to deliver swift, targeted nutritional support. However, the effectiveness of these models varies significantly depending on coordination mechanisms, adaptability and contextual fit.

While governments and humanitarian agencies have made considerable strides in safeguarding children’s nutrition during wartime, persistent and complex challenges continue to undermine these efforts. These obstacles not only disrupt service delivery but also hinder the development of sustainable systems capable of weathering prolonged instability.

Logistical damaged infrastructure: Constraints, such as roads, bridges and transportation networks, alongside ongoing hostilities and access restrictions, severely complicate the movement of food supplies and personnel. Active conflict zones may be inaccessible due to security risks, landmines or military blockades, delaying or

altogether halting the delivery of emergency nutrition interventions (12). Remote and conflict-affected regions often suffer from prolonged isolation, leaving many children without vital nutritional support.

Resource Shortages: Many governments operating in conflict zones face acute limitations in domestic resources and institutional capacity. They often depend heavily on external donor funding to sustain food security programs, which makes operations vulnerable to shifting political priorities or donor fatigue (13). The lack of stable funding disrupts program continuity, reduces coverage and undermines the ability to scale effective interventions where they are most needed.

Political Instability: Weak governance structures, corruption and fragmented authority across regions contribute to unpredictable and uneven food aid delivery. In some cases, contested territories or non-humanitarian access complicate coordination and obstruct state armed groups (14). Political fragmentation can also lead to inconsistent policy application, competition among local actors and delays in crisis response, all of which increase children’s risk of hunger and malnutrition.

Monitoring and Evaluation Gaps: Accurate data collection on intervention coverage, nutritional outcomes and program performance is essential for accountability and course correction. However, in conflict-affected states, governments and aid agencies often face challenges in gathering and analyzing reliable information. Lack of trained personnel, disrupted communication networks and security concerns can prevent systematic monitoring and hinder efforts to assess and improve nutrition strategies (15). This impedes evidence-based decision-making and compromises the efficiency of relief efforts.

Collectively, these challenges underscore the necessity for adaptive governance, integrated systems design and robust international cooperation. Without addressing these foundational issues, progress toward ensuring children’s food security in conflict settings remains fragile and uneven.

1-1. Case Study: Ethiopia's Nutrition Cluster Response

In Ethiopia's Tigray and Afar regions, the federal government activated the Nutrition Cluster under the Emergency Nutrition Coordination Unit (ENCU), partnering with UNICEF, WFP and NGOs. The integrated response included mass screening, distribution of Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Foods (RUTF), micronutrient supplementation, infant feeding education and emergency rations like BP-5 biscuits.

While comprehensive in scope, this model revealed critical limitations. The centralized coordination structure struggled with fragmented partner engagement, leading to duplication in some districts and service gaps in others. These issues underscore the need for decentralized, context-sensitive implementation models that empower local actors and streamline logistics. Without real-time data sharing and adaptive planning, even well-resourced programs risk uneven coverage and diminished impact (16).

2. Comparative Insights: Global Rapid-Response Nutrition Models

Globally, governments deploy similar interventions therapeutic feeding centers, mobile health units, fortified food kits and cash-based transfers. The success of these models hinges on three factors:

Real-time nutritional surveillance: Programs that integrate dynamic data systems can better allocate resources and respond to shifting needs.

Robust partner integration: Unified strategies across agencies prevent overlap and ensure equitable distribution.

Decentralized implementation: Localized delivery mechanisms are more resilient to conflict-related disruptions and better suited to community needs.

For instance, mobile health units in South Sudan have shown greater reach and flexibility than static centers, especially in regions with volatile security conditions (17). Conversely, cash-based transfers in Yemen faced challenges due to inflation and market instability, highlighting the importance of economic context in model selection (18).

3. Toward a Unified Strategy

Emergency nutrition programs must move beyond food distribution to embrace equity, continuity and strategic alignment. Ethiopia's experience illustrates the need for:

Agile governance: Rapid decision-making and flexible protocols are essential in conflict zones.

Sustained funding: Short-term grants often undermine long-term program viability.

Community engagement: Local buy-in enhances cultural relevance and program uptake.

Historical analyses of wartime health policy in Ethiopia further emphasize the importance of institutional memory and adaptive governance in shaping effective emergency responses (19).

4. School Feeding Schemes in Conflict-Affected Contexts

In conflict-affected regions, school feeding programs are not merely nutritional interventions they are strategic tools for stabilizing communities, fostering resilience and supporting psychosocial recovery. While widely implemented, their effectiveness varies significantly depending on contextual factors such as governance strength, logistical capacity and community engagement.

In relatively stable zones within war-torn countries, schools often become the last remaining structured environments capable of delivering consistent meals to children. This is particularly evident in northeastern Nigeria, where insurgency has displaced thousands of families. The government's efforts to provide nutrition through mobile feeding units in IDP camps have faced frequent disruptions due to fluctuating security and funding gaps, revealing the fragility of school-linked delivery systems when not embedded in broader resilience frameworks.

Beyond hunger mitigation, school feeding schemes contribute to emotional and cognitive recovery. Regular access to meals encourages school attendance and restores routine, which is especially therapeutic for displaced or traumatized children. In Ukraine, for example, children exposed to hostilities have shown increased food aversion and disrupted eating patterns, underscoring the need for trauma-informed

nutrition programming within school settings (20).

Governments and humanitarian organizations are increasingly adopting climate-smart school feeding models that prioritize locally sourced produce. This approach has gained traction in Afghanistan and Sub-Saharan Africa, where initiatives like edible insect farming and community food hubs have reduced dependency on external aid and improved dietary diversity (21). However, the success of these models hinges on reliable infrastructure and local agricultural capacity-conditions often compromised in active conflict zones.

The superiority of climate-smart models lies in their adaptability and community ownership, yet they are not universally applicable. In Ethiopia's Tigray and Afar regions, despite efforts to distribute fortified rations through a multi-tiered intervention model, misaligned coordination and sporadic funding led to uneven coverage and duplication of services. This highlights the importance of coherent logistics and sustained financing in scaling school-based nutrition programs (9).

Moreover, institutional legitimacy plays a critical role in program success. In Colombia and similar fragile settings, weak governance and aid diversion by illicit groups have eroded public trust, undermining the reach and equity of school feeding efforts. Without transparent oversight and community participation, even well-designed programs risk exclusion and inefficiency (22).

To be effective, school feeding schemes must be integrated into national emergency response and development strategies. This includes establishing flexible funding mechanisms, ensuring inter-agency coordination and embedding programs within local education and health systems. While these schemes cannot replace household food security, they offer a vital buffer especially when family systems are weakened by conflict.

5. International Collaborations for Child Food Security in Conflict Settings

In conflict-affected regions, international collaborations have emerged as indispensable mechanisms for safeguarding child food security. Governments often rely on partnerships with

global actors such as UNICEF, the World Food Programme (WFP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to overcome logistical, financial and technical barriers. These collaborations enable multi-layered responses that integrate humanitarian standards into national programming, mobilize resources and extend services into high-risk zones.

5-1. Strategic Roles of International Partners

UNICEF contributes expertise in nutritional assessment, child health protocols and supply chain management for therapeutic foods. WFP provides logistical support for large-scale food distribution, including school feeding and emergency rations. FAO supports agricultural recovery and local procurement strategies that stabilize food systems and promote resilience. These roles are not merely additive but synergistic, allowing for coordinated interventions such as mobile nutrition clinics, Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Foods (RUTF) and community-based malnutrition screening.

6. Case Study Integration

6-1. South Sudan: Rapid Response Mechanisms

In South Sudan, the government partnered with WFP and UNICEF to deploy Rapid Response Mechanisms (RRMs) in isolated regions affected by civil unrest. These mobile missions screened children, distributed RUTF and delivered general food assistance. While RRM were effective in reaching remote populations, their sustainability was challenged by logistical complexity and reliance on international access corridors. This underscores the importance of embedding local capacity within emergency frameworks (23).

6-2. Ethiopia (Tigray and Afar): Nutrition Cluster Coordination

The Ethiopian Nutrition Cluster, led by the Emergency Nutrition Coordination Unit (ENCU) with support from UNICEF, WFP and NGOs, implemented a multi-tiered intervention model. It included malnutrition screening, micronutrient supplementation, infant feeding education and fortified ration distribution. Despite its comprehensive scope, misaligned coordination and sporadic funding led to uneven coverage and service duplication. This case illustrates the need

for harmonized operational frameworks and stable financing (24).

6-3. Yemen: Behavior Change and Cash Transfers

In Yemen, international collaboration supported behavior change programs that combined cash transfers with culturally sensitive nutrition education. These initiatives led to a 15-16% increase in exclusive breast feeding during the first six months of life. The success of this model highlights the importance of integrating financial support with localized education to enhance intervention efficacy (25).

6-4. Nigeria: Surveillance and Mobile Feeding in IDP Camps

In northeastern Nigeria, the government and international NGOs established nutrition surveillance systems and mobile feeding units within IDP camps. These efforts targeted children suffering from stunting and underweight conditions. However, fluctuating security and inconsistent donor funding disrupted service continuity, revealing the fragility of externally supported models without embedded resilience mechanisms (26).

7. Challenges and Policy Implications

While international collaborations act as force multipliers, their effectiveness is contingent on context-sensitive design, robust monitoring and genuine capacity-building. Challenges such as partner misalignment, uneven coverage and dependency on external logistics persist across settings. Post-conflict recovery demands sustained engagement to rebuild local food systems and institutionalize child nutrition as a public health priority.

7-1. Decentralized Food Distribution in Conflict-Affected Regions

Decentralized food distribution has gained prominence as a strategy for safeguarding child food security in conflict-affected regions, particularly where centralized systems are incapacitated by violence, infrastructural degradation or logistical blockades. While these models offer flexibility and community empowerment, their effectiveness varies significantly across contexts and warrants deeper analysis.

Localized food networks and community-based agriculture can bypass disrupted supply chains and sustain nutritional access. However, their success depends heavily on pre-existing community cohesion, agricultural capacity and institutional support. In regions with fragmented social structures or limited agronomic knowledge, such models may falter without sustained external facilitation. Moreover, while smallholder support and informal markets enhance food equity, they often lack scalability and consistency in supply, especially during prolonged crises (27).

Infrastructural damage such as destroyed roads and storage facilities makes decentralized systems appealing, yet these same limitations can hinder the movement of locally produced food to broader populations. Community autonomy in food production and distribution reduces reliance on external aid, but it also risks isolation if not integrated into broader logistical frameworks. For example, community food hubs have shown promise in stabilizing access, yet their operational success is contingent on reliable funding, technical expertise and coordination with formal institutions.

Dietary diversity is another touted benefit, as local farms often grow culturally appropriate crops. However, this advantage can be undermined by seasonal variability, climate shocks and limited crop portfolios, which may not meet the full nutritional needs of children. Government investments in seeds, tools and training are critical, but without long-term policy alignment and monitoring, these efforts may remain fragmented or unsustainable (28).

Social resilience through community ownership is a powerful outcome, especially where trust in national institutions is eroded. Yet, decentralized models can also exacerbate inequalities if certain groups dominate local decision-making or if marginalized populations are excluded from resource access. Thus, decentralization must be accompanied by inclusive governance mechanisms and conflict-sensitive programming.

While decentralized systems offer a pragmatic alternative when traditional supply chains collapse, their limitations ranging from scalability and equity to sustainability and coordination must

be critically addressed. Integrating these models into national food security policies requires not only logistical planning but also contextual adaptation, inclusive governance and robust monitoring frameworks to ensure that children's nutritional needs are met consistently across diverse conflict settings.

7-2. Policy Integration: Building Resilient Food Systems after Conflict

Post-conflict recovery requires more than physical reconstruction, it demands systemic transformation that embeds resilience into social institutions. Among these, food security must be integrated not as a stand-alone emergency measure but as a strategic pillar of national recovery. Governments that embed nutrition-sensitive policies into broader development frameworks tend to achieve more equitable and sustainable outcomes, particularly for children who are disproportionately affected by conflict-related deprivation (29).

However, the effectiveness of policy integration varies across contexts. In some post-conflict settings, agricultural rehabilitation programs that prioritize climate-resilient crops and community cooperatives have strengthened local food systems (30). Yet, these models face limitations in regions with degraded land, weak governance or limited technical capacity. Without sustained investment in extension services and climate adaptation, such programs risk short-term gains without long-term viability (31).

Health system integration is another critical component. Re-establishing clinics to deliver nutritional counseling and therapeutic feeding is essential, but in fragile states, staffing shortages, supply chain disruptions and lack of coordination often undermine service delivery (32). These challenges highlight the need for robust health governance and intersectoral planning to ensure continuity and impact (33).

Social safety nets, such as conditional cash transfers, school feeding programs and food vouchers, play a dual role in alleviating hunger and stimulating local economies (34). Yet, their success depends on targeting accuracy, administrative capacity and alignment with broader child protection goals. In contexts where institutional capacity is low, these programs may

be fragmented or politicized, reducing their effectiveness and trust among beneficiaries (35-36).

Embedding food security into governance frameworks fosters cross-sectoral collaboration, but coordination remains a persistent challenge (37). Ministries often operate in silos and international partners may pursue divergent agendas. Without mechanisms for joint planning and accountability, efforts can be duplicated or leave critical gaps. A systems approach linking agriculture, health, education and disaster response is essential to transition food security from reactive aid to proactive nation-building.

A closer look at Yemen further illustrates the consequences of weak policy integration in post-conflict settings. Yemen's protracted conflict has devastated its food systems, leading to one of the world's worst humanitarian crises (38). Despite extensive international aid, policy integration remains weak due to fragmented governance and politicization of food aid (39). The absence of a unified national government has hindered cross-sectoral coordination between agriculture, health and education ministries. As a result, food security efforts are often siloed and reactive, driven primarily by humanitarian actors rather than embedded within a coherent national policy framework. Although programs like therapeutic feeding and school meals exist (40), they are not institutionalized through legislation or budgetary commitments, making them vulnerable to funding volatility and political manipulation. Yemen demonstrates that without institutional coherence and inclusive governance, food security interventions, even when widespread, struggle to evolve from short-term emergency relief into long-term, resilient systems.

Ultimately, policy integration must be context-sensitive, inclusive and backed by legislative and budgetary commitments. It should not only prioritize the nutritional needs of children but also address structural inequalities that perpetuate food insecurity. Transforming feeding into development requires more than programs; it demands political will, institutional coherence and adaptive governance.

8. Case Studies

Real-world examples provide critical insights into the diverse strategies governments and humanitarian actors deploy to protect children's food security during armed conflict. From emergency relief to local food system strengthening, these case studies demonstrate both innovation and persistent challenges.

8-1. Nigeria

In northeastern Nigeria, prolonged armed conflict fueled by insurgency has dramatically increased childhood stunting and underweight prevalence, especially among internally displaced persons (IDPs). In response, the Nigerian government, in collaboration with international NGOs, has concentrated efforts within IDP camps by establishing nutrition surveillance systems and mobile feeding units (41). Yet, fluctuating security conditions and inconsistent funding frequently disrupt service provision, leaving gaps in coverage and compromising child nutrition outcomes.

8-2. South Sudan

The government of South Sudan has embraced Rapid Response Mechanisms (RRMs) in partnership with WFP and UNICEF to deliver emergency nutrition interventions in isolated regions affected by civil unrest. These mobile, short-term missions deploy health and nutrition teams capable of screening children, distributing Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Foods (RUTF) and implementing general food assistance. RRMs have been crucial for reaching remote populations, though sustainability remains contingent on continued access and coordinated logistics (42).

8-3. Yemen

In Yemen, a context marked by humanitarian collapse, government-aligned behavior change programs combining cash transfers with culturally sensitive nutrition education have improved early feeding practices. Notably, participating communities saw a 15-16% rise in exclusive breastfeeding during the first six months of life, underscoring the impact of tailored education alongside financial support (43). These initiatives highlight the critical role of local cultural adaptation in enhancing intervention efficacy.

Conclusion

Ensuring food security for children during armed conflict is not only a humanitarian imperative but a strategic cornerstone for sustainable peace building and national resilience. This study proposes a conceptual shift: viewing child nutrition during wartime through the lens of nutrition sovereignty, a framework that emphasizes the right of communities and governments to define and control food systems that prioritize children's well-being, even amid conflict. This perspective moves beyond emergency aid to advocate for embedded, locally governed and culturally responsive nutrition infrastructures.

Government leadership must evolve from reactive relief provision to proactive system-building, integrating decentralized food networks, nutrition-sensitive agriculture and psychosocial support into broader conflict recovery and development agendas. Transparent resource management and multispectral partnerships with organizations like UNICEF, WFP and FAO are essential, but must be guided by a theory of adaptive governance, which emphasizes flexibility, accountability and community engagement in volatile environments.

Future research should explore how nutrition sovereignty and adaptive governance interact in different conflict contexts and how these frameworks can inform policy design that is both equitable and resilient. Longitudinal studies and comparative policy analyses across regions can deepen understanding of what sustains child food security beyond crisis. By embedding these theoretical insights into policy, governments can ensure that children not only survive, but thrive as agents of recovery and peace.

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