

Too Many Children are Dying from Wasting

What Is Wasting?

As many as [785 million](#) people go hungry around the world every day and [45 million](#) of these are children. The eradication of hunger is a [Complex Wicked Problem](#) that affects 1 in 11 people worldwide, most notably in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Pacific, and Southern Asia. The UN defines hunger as periods of [severe food insecurity](#), leading to distress, malnutrition, and undernourishment. Hunger comes in many forms, often the most notable and problematic is acute hunger. Acute hunger is also known as wasting and is one of the biggest killers of children under 5 worldwide. It is prevalent in the Sub-Saharan countries of Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific region. Compared to 2019, 152 million more people are hungry and this will only [rise](#) in the years to come.

The Diagnosis of Wasting

Acute hunger is a severe form of [undernourishment](#) and malnutrition characterised in children by a reduction in thinness-to-height ratio. This means that their weight is not sufficient in comparison to their height. A child diagnosed with wasting is shown to be significantly below the ideal [weight for their height](#) owing to rapid weight loss or a failure to gain weight. They must be more than 2 standard deviations from the internationally defined medians for height by age, indicating an insufficient energy intake, especially of protein. In some cases, there is also abdominal swelling, a common symptom of [Kwashiorkor](#) syndrome which also leads to frequent infections. This swelling can result in a bilateral pitting oedema (fluid under the skin of the arms and legs) as a result of a deficiency in either magnesium or potassium.

[8 million children](#) under 5 are at risk of dying from wasting, which equates to one child dying every 60 seconds. Approximately [1 in 15](#) children worldwide are wasted, with these children 11 times more likely to die than a child who is malnourished. Wasting is the most life-threatening, visible, and immediate form of

malnutrition, resulting in 1 million deaths of children per year. Acute hunger is caused by short, but severe periods of [food scarcity](#). [Food shortages](#) are common in areas of lower economic growth, exacerbated by conflicts, disease, [finite resources](#), and extreme weather events. It is not only the less developed areas that face issues with wasting, with two-thirds of children suffering from wasting in areas not considered to be under any form of food or economic emergency, including in [Australia](#).



A wasted child.

Source: [UNICEF](#)

Common Causes of Wasting

There is increasing evidence to suggest that [wasting](#) occurs very early in life, mainly affecting children aged [2 and under](#). Insufficient maternal nutrition during pregnancy is a common cause of wasting and leads to [inadequate birth weights](#). Inequality is a common factor in malnutrition, with women and girls making up [60%](#) of the malnourished. Climate change is also contributing to a [worsening food crisis](#), with altered rainfall patterns harming crop production and leading to crop failures. Higher temperatures require more water and additional nutrients and natural disasters exponentially destroy many fields of crops, contributing to the degradation of the fertility of the land. Limited access to safe [drinking water](#), such as is common in less developed countries, also increases the prevalence of diseases such as those causing diarrhoea.

A Cure for Wasting

The process of wasting often starts before birth and continues throughout childhood and beyond. The prevention of child wasting must then start with the mother. Eating [nutritious and adequate](#) food during pregnancy allows for a healthy birth weight and a healthy immune system for the child. Once born, the mother must use best practices with breastfeeding and hygiene to prevent malnutrition and avoid spreading disease. This will allow the child the best chance to avoid wasting in the first few years of their life.

[Early detection](#) is key to preventing wasting. If a child is suffering from wasting, the cure is to obtain nutritious food. [Ready to use](#) food (RTUF) is a nutrient-dense peanut paste, often supplied by relief organisations, which delivers essential nutrients in an easy to swallow format. It is a lifesaving treatment for many and sometimes the only nutritious food available. Many children who receive treatment for wasting, such as RTUF, still suffer from [prolonged effects](#) including stunting, respiratory issues, and in severe cases, brain damage. Across the planet wasting is an under-acknowledged, under-resourced, and under-prioritised issue, causing the cure to be out of reach for many. The prevention of wasting is reliant on access to health services but, unfortunately, in many countries where wasting is prevalent, there is [limited access](#) to healthcare. This limits access and treatment for many, exacerbating the problem and causing a reliance on international organisations for survival.

International organisations also struggle with obtaining enough RTUF to feed every person in need and only [bold political action](#) will help this food crisis. While the hungry starve, [the rich](#) face an obesity crisis.

Contributing to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

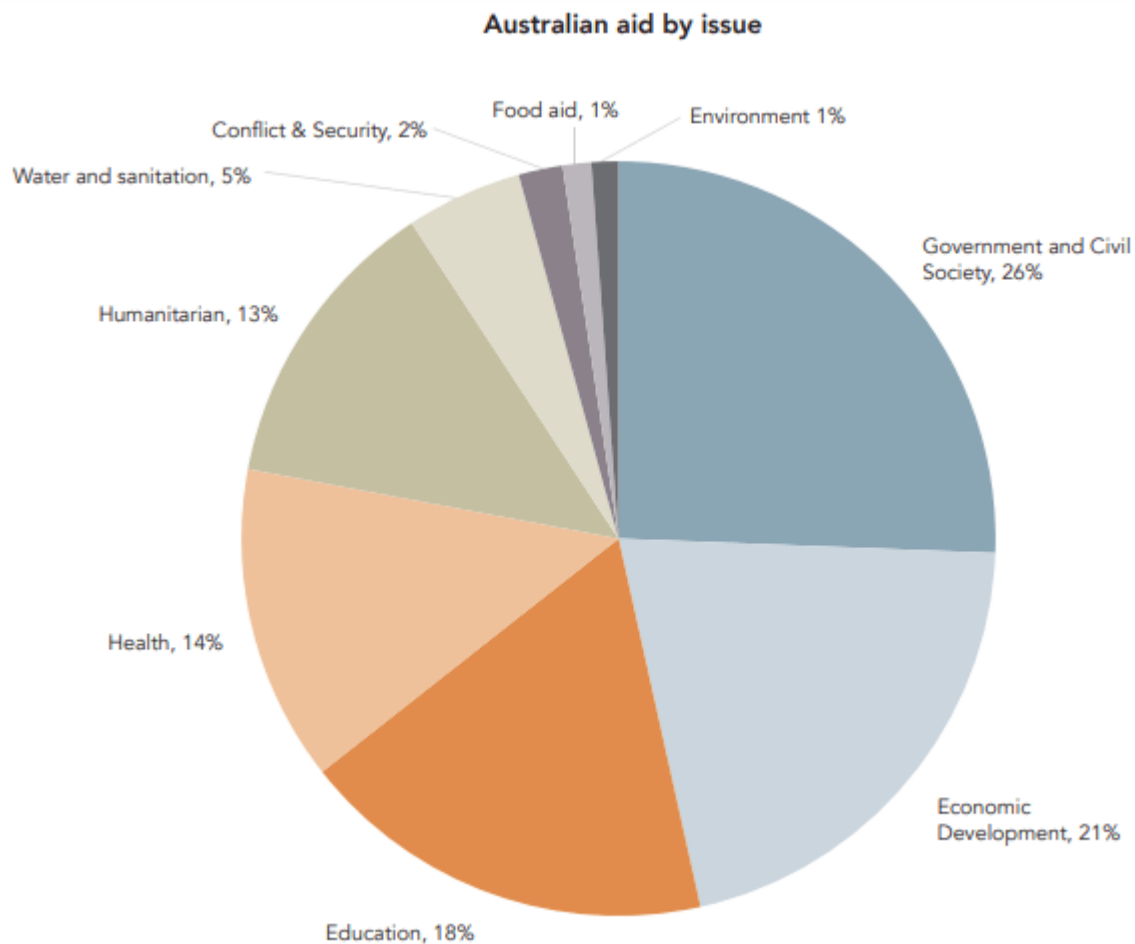
Ending wasting will allow for progress towards other SDGs such as [Quality Education](#) (SDG4), [Gender Equality](#) (SDG5), and [Clean Water and Sanitation](#) (SDG6).

Moving Forward

As world hunger is a Complex Wicked Problem, there is no easy fix. Science-Based Targets must be used to track the progress of countries. This will then allow for clear guidelines that countries can work towards and contribute to the United Nation's [SDG](#), in particular, [No Poverty](#) (SDG1), [Zero Hunger](#) (SDG2), and [Reduced Inequalities](#) (SDG10). To prevent wasting, countries must invest in health care, especially for pregnant women and children, aligning with [Good Health and Well-Being](#) (SDG3). Unfortunately, less developed countries typically have [reduced capacity](#) to offer an effective health care system. To best [prevent wasting](#), it is critical to ensure adequate birth weights and maternal health. Access to a variety of food to ensure adequate nutrition is essential, despite critical food shortages and droughts. Thus, they rely on international organisations such as [Save the Children](#), [UNICEF](#), and [WHO](#) to provide what they cannot. Donating to relief organisations provides financial help when a nation's policies fall short. This aligns with [Responsible Consumption and Production](#) (SDG12). As individuals, we can also shift our diets to more climate-inclusive meals, such as eating less meat and more seasonal, local food.

International Aid Donations

Many wealthier countries contribute aid, although the amount contributed falls short of what is required to stabilise economies and allow countries to become independent. For example, Australia donating to help issues of conflict and economic development will aid poverty alleviation, but donations specifically for food aid only contribute 1% of its money. 26% goes to government and civil society management.



The Australian Donation by Issue.

Source: [OECD](#)

As climate change is exacerbating the issue of poverty, work to mitigate rising temperatures is essential and can [alleviate the pressure](#) on relief organisations, prevent disasters such as droughts and crop failures, and allow for the natural abatement of food shortages and therefore hunger.

Education on best hygiene practices is also a means to reduce the prevalence of wasting in countries with less access to clean water. Providing clean water and soap as part of the [WASH practices](#) (Water, Access, Sanitisation, and Hygiene) can prevent many diseases such as diarrhoea which often lead to higher instances of wasting.



Good Handwashing Practices.

Source: [The Mayo Clinic](#)

[Political action](#) is urgent to address the issue of wasting. Currently, starving people rely on donations made to relief organisations and their ability to source enough RTUF to supply everyone. This is not sustainable and is absolutely not thrivable. This needs to change, including a shift in global food production. [Unevenly distributed](#) food with unequal access means disadvantaged people have little to no access to food.

Conclusion

Wasting is often a result of poor conditions at birth and reduced nourishment in the first stages of life. Preventing malnutrition, however, is a complex issue that does not have an easy solution. Food shortages are the primary reason for malnutrition and factors such as climate change, land degradation, disease, and war all contribute to food shortages. These factors, or those combined with disease and climate change, make for prime factors of wasting. Good nutrition in the early stages of life, especially before birth, is key to avoiding wasting. Prevention is easy if there is access to nutritious food. Reducing or eliminating hunger worldwide contributes to progress towards many of the SDGs and should be a priority.

Political action and implementation are a priority. Governments are responsible for their people. This requires [investment](#) in health care as well as education and ensuring adequate food is available for all citizens.

The Thrive Framework

Eliminating hunger also aligns with [THRIVE Project](#)'s 12 pillars of thrivability, known as the [Foundational Focus Factors](#) (FFFs). Focusing on the 12 FFFs allows the world to go beyond sustainability toward [thrivability](#). [Context Based Metrics](#) relates to relief organisations providing a temporary solution through RTUF. [Science Based Targets](#) are an important factor in measuring the number of children affected by wasting and how this number improves over time. [Complex Wicked Problems](#) shows the many factors that contribute to wasting as well as those that hinder relief efforts. Finite resources and strong sustainability also align with wasting through the depletion of food resources. To learn more about thrivability you can visit THRIVE's [website](#), listen to [webinars](#), read [published articles](#), or subscribe to the [newsletter](#).