

# CHILD FOOD POVERTY



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**A Nutrition Crisis in Early Childhood in Lebanon**

June 2023

# Foreword



A small cup of milk and a few spoons of starch porridge (mouhalabieh). For young children living in food poverty, this may be the only food they eat every day.

Children cannot survive solely on staple grains. They must consume a variety of nutritious foods, such as fruits, vegetables, fish, eggs, and dairy products- to keep their brains and bodies growing.

Nonetheless, in Lebanon today, due to the economic crisis, three out of every four children under the age of five live in food poverty (among Lebanese and refugee population). These children are not fed a diverse diet to grow and develop to their full potential. Meaning they are fed poor diets that include at most only four food groups. This is indeed a children's crisis, and is affecting their ability to survive and thrive.

Worryingly, more than one in every four children under the age of five (among Lebanese and refugee population) – or 85,000 children – live in and suffer from severe food poverty, which means they are fed extremely poor diets consisting of at most two food groups, often a cereal and possibly some milk. Children living in extreme food poverty are especially vulnerable to severe stunting and wasting, the most dangerous forms of undernutrition in early childhood, which can increase children's risk of death by up to 12 times and impair their ability to develop and reach their full potential.

While correcting malnutrition is very cost effective with an estimated 8:1 benefit cost ratio, the tragic cost of inaction will be borne by children in Lebanon- and will ultimately negatively impact the long term economic growth of the country. Unless essential multiple delivery systems such as nutrition, food, social protection and health systems are empowered to deliver adequate and quality services, diets and promote practices, children will be suffering from the lifelong impacts of nutritional deprivations on their growth and development.

**Edouard Beigbeder**  
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# What is child food poverty?

## **Child food poverty: Children's inability to access and consume a minimum diverse diet in early childhood**

What and how children are fed in early childhood determines their survival and shapes their growth, development and learning for the rest of their lives. But thousands of children, especially the youngest, the poorest and the most marginalized, do not have access to the minimum nutritious foods they need during the time in their lives when good nutrition matters most.

Across the globe, millions of families are struggling to provide their children with the nutritious food they need to grow, develop, and learn. The situation stands to worsen as the world grapples with a crushing global food and nutrition crisis that is taking the greatest toll on the most vulnerable children and families.

Lebanon is experiencing a growing triple burden of malnutrition (stunting, micronutrient deficiencies and obesity) among women, children, and adolescents. Stunting prevalence is seven per cent among Lebanese children under 5 years, while it is 25 per cent among Syrian refugees in informal settlements, an increase from 17 per cent in 2013. Over 40% of children and women have anemia<sup>1</sup> and over 30% of adolescent girls and boys have overweight and obesity.<sup>2</sup>

The first Lebanon IPC Acute Food Insecurity Analysis projected that, between January and April 2023, about 2.26 million people, corresponding to 42 percent of the analyzed population are expected to face high levels of food insecurity IPC Phase 3 (Crisis) or above.<sup>3</sup>

UNICEF and WHO recommend that young children consume a variety of foods to meet their nutrient needs and support healthy growth and development.<sup>4,5</sup>

The consumption of foods from diverse food groups in the first two years of life is associated with improved linear growth.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, diets lacking in diversity – particularly nutrient-dense foods such as eggs, fish, dairy products, fruits and vegetables – can increase the risk of nutrient deficiencies, stunted growth and impaired physical and cognitive development.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

UNICEF measures child food poverty using the children's dietary diversity score in early childhood.<sup>9</sup> This score defines minimum dietary diversity as the percentage of children 6–23 months of age consuming foods and beverages from at least five out of eight defined food groups during the previous day.



### **Severe child food poverty:**

The percentage of children consuming foods and beverages from zero, one or two out of eight defined food groups during the previous day.

### **Moderate child food poverty:**

The percentage of children consuming foods and beverages from three or four out of eight defined food groups during the previous day.



To meet the minimum dietary diversity for healthy growth and development, **Children need to consume foods from at least five out of the eight recommended food groups.**

The eight food groups are:



Breastmilk



Grains,  
roots, tubers  
and plantains



Vitamin A-rich  
fruits and  
vegetables



Flesh  
foods



Pulses,  
nuts and  
seeds



Eggs



Other  
fruits and  
vegetables



Dairy  
products

Based on this indicator, UNICEF defines children living in food poverty as the percentage of children under 5 years of age consuming foods and beverages from four or fewer of the eight defined food groups.

**0-2 food groups/day**

they live in severe food poverty

**3-4 food groups/day**

they experience moderate food poverty

**5 or more food groups/day**

they meet the minimum dietary diversity

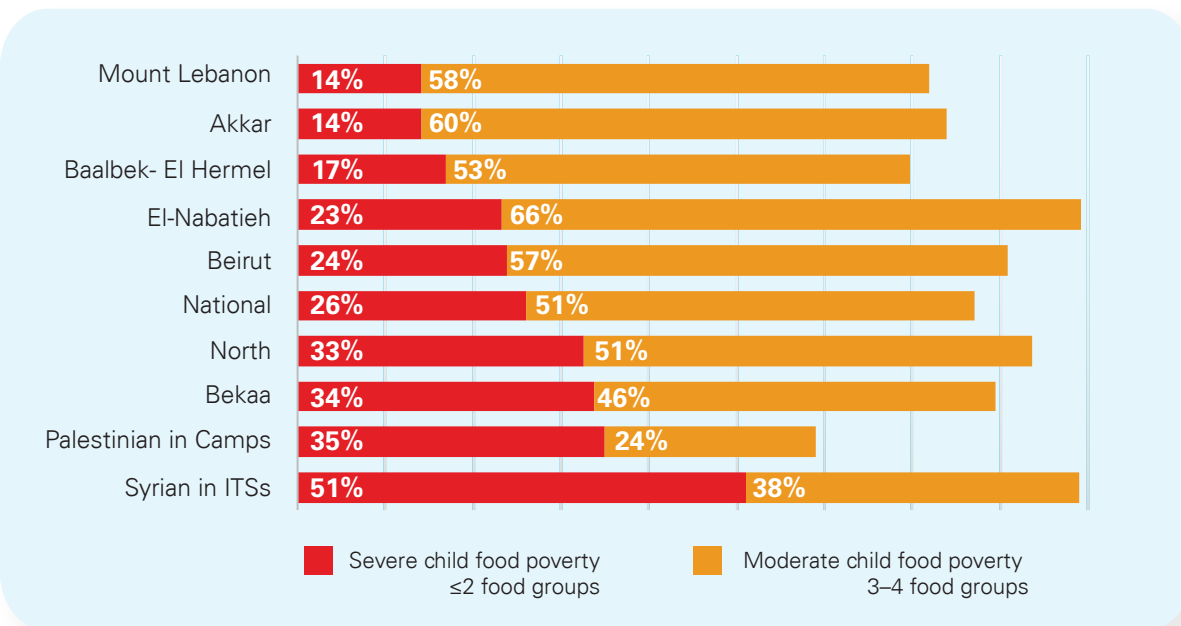


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## In Lebanon, 1 in 4 children under five lives in severe food poverty

### Percentage of children living in severe food poverty and moderate food poverty, by governorate and population groups, 2021

Source: Lebanon National SMART Nutrition Survey 2021- 2022



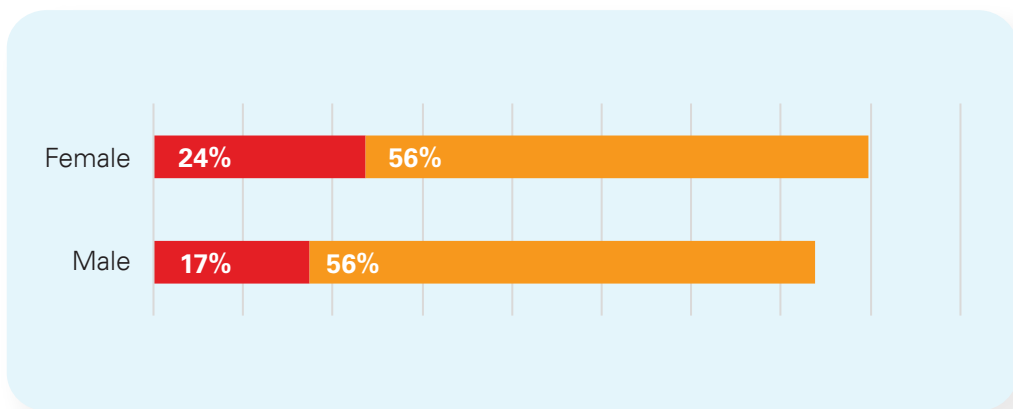
Some regions face greater challenges than others – more than 30 per cent of children in North and Bekaa live in severe food poverty.



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## Girls are more vulnerable to live in severe food poverty

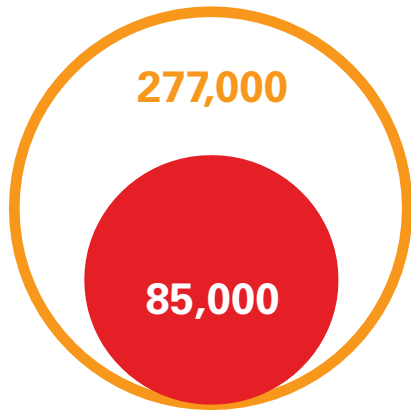
### Child Food poverty and gender



Severe child food poverty exposes the inequalities between boys and girls in Lebanon.

■ Severe child food poverty ≤2 food groups
 ■ Moderate child food poverty 3-4 food groups

# How many children are experiencing food poverty and where do they live in Lebanon?



In Lebanon, 277,000 children under 5 are experiencing food poverty in early childhood, a third of which (85,000) are living in severe food poverty.

In all governorates over 60% of children are living in food poverty. In Bekaa, North and Beirut, 43, 39 and 30 per cent of children who are experiencing food poverty, live in severe food poverty respectively.

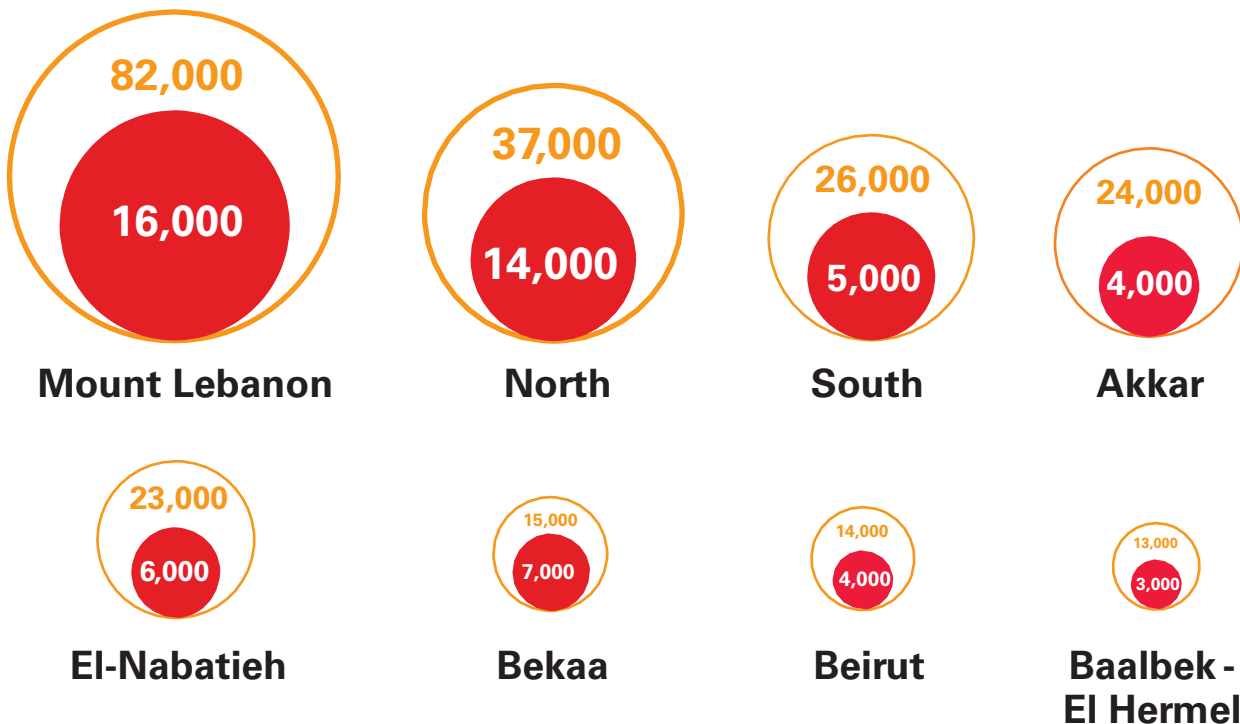
60 per cent of the total children in food poverty are living in Mount Lebanon, North and Informal Tented Settlements.

● Severe child food poverty  
≤2 food groups

○ Moderate child food poverty  
3–4 food groups

## Number of children under 5 experiencing food poverty and number living in severe food poverty (in 1000), by governorates, 2021

Source: Lebanon National SMART Nutrition Survey, 2021-2022



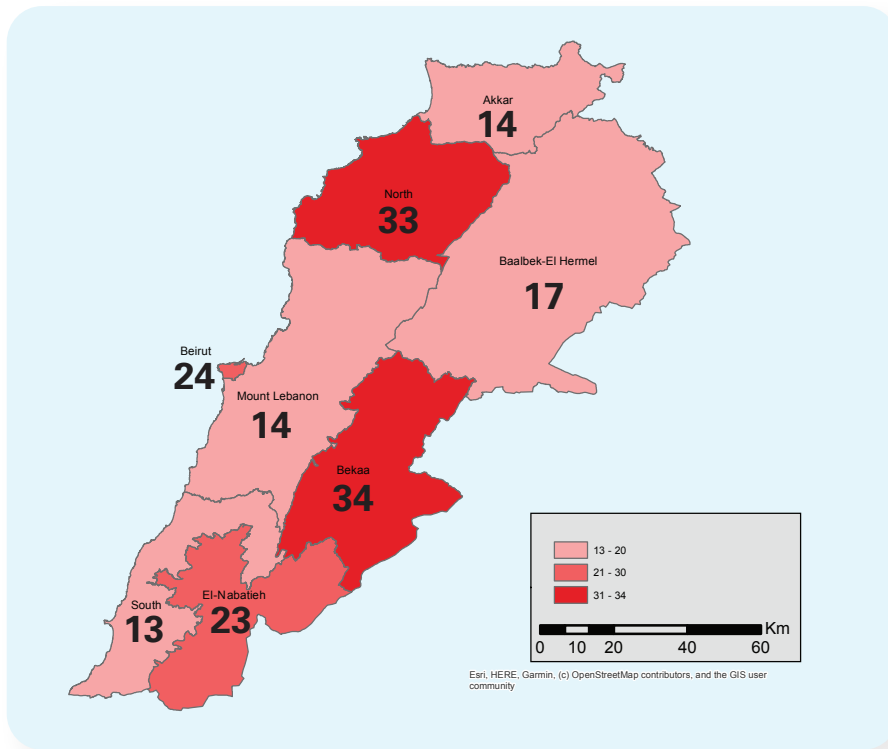
● Severe child food poverty  
≤2 food groups

○ Moderate child food poverty  
3–4 food groups

# Children are disproportionately affected by severe food poverty across governorates

## Percentage of children living in severe food poverty, by governorate, 2021

Source: Lebanon National SMART Nutrition Survey 2021- 2022

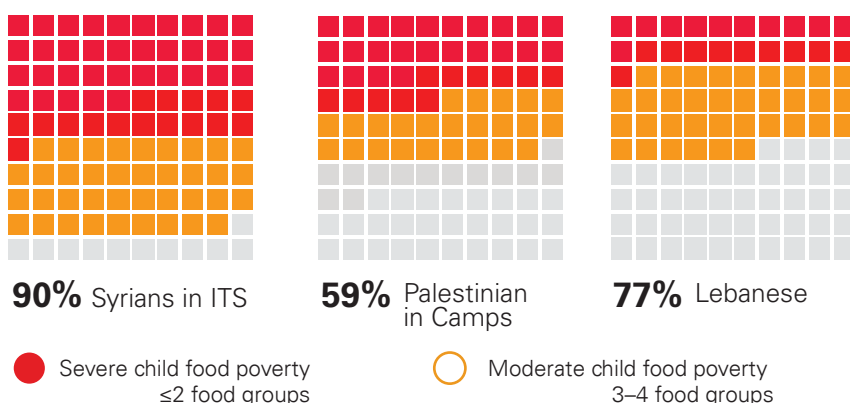


Children living in North and Bekaa have the highest rate of severe food poverty.

# Poverty during early childhood coupled with poor knowledge and practices of caregivers on healthy nutrition, drives the child food poverty status in the country.

## Percentage of children experiencing food poverty in early childhood, by nationality, 2021

Source: Lebanon National SMART Nutrition Survey 2021- 2022



51 per cent of Syrian children living in Informal Tented Settlements, 35 per cent of children living in Palestinian camps and 21% of Lebanese are living in severe food poverty.



# Children: At the epicenter of the food and nutrition crisis in Lebanon

The deterioration of the economic situation and depreciation of the Lebanese Pound (LBP), protracted inflation, and soaring international prices, and the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic – are the main contributing causes of this detrimental situation.

According to this estimate, in all stratas (governorates and two refugee population groups in settlements and camps), at least 60 per cent of children are experiencing food poverty; 4 of the stratas are experiencing some of the worst impacts of the crisis. These governorates and two refugee population groups in settlements and camps can be grouped into three clusters:

- 1) Syrians in Informal Tented Settlements, Palestinian Camps, North and Bekaa**
- 2) Beirut and El Nebatieh**
- 3) Baalbak, Akkar, Mount Lebanon and South**

The children living in food poverty are fed diets that include at most less than four food groups, as opposed to the minimum five food groups that children need to grow, develop, and thrive in early childhood. This demonstrates that the current social protection and food assistance schemes are not sensitive to the needs of children during early years.

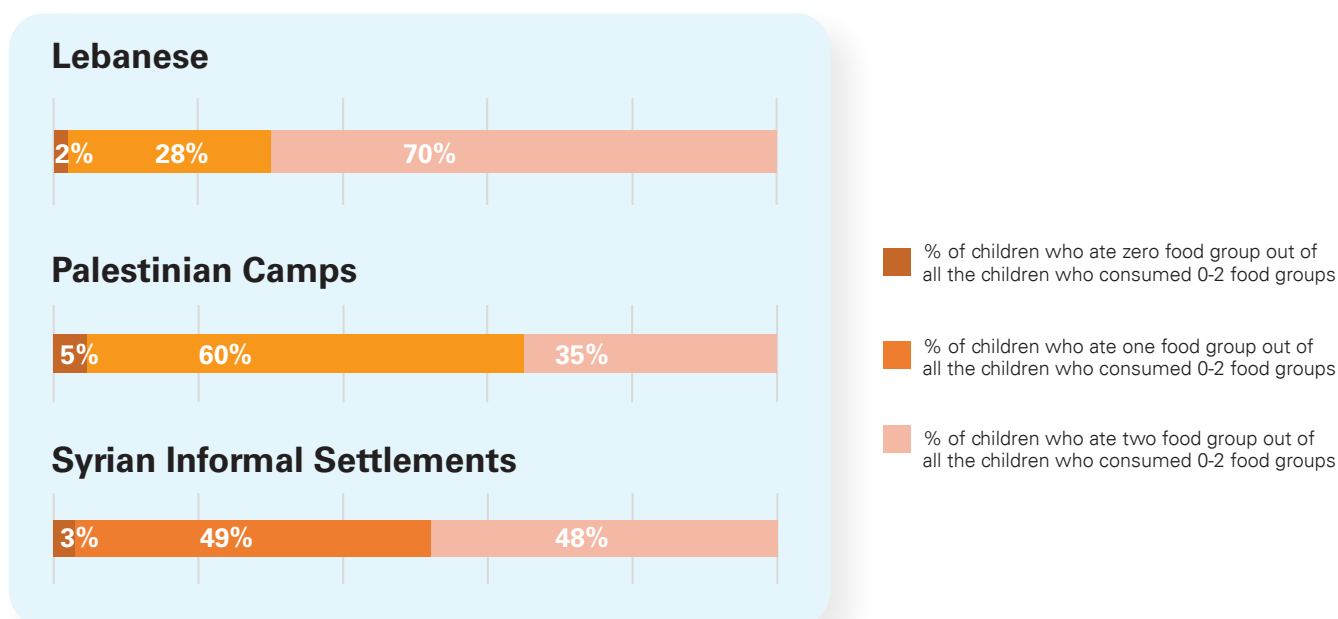


## What are children living in severe food poverty being fed in Lebanon?

On average, 48 per cent of 85,000 children under 5 who are living in severe food poverty are eating only one – or none – of the eight recommended food groups. For Syrian children living in informal settlements and Palestinian camps, this figure is over 50 per cent, which signals that severe child food poverty has reached to alarming levels.

### Distribution of the number of food groups consumed by children living in severe food poverty, by nationality, 2021

Source: Lebanon National SMART Nutrition Survey 2021- 2022



## What does the diet of children living in severe food poverty consist of?

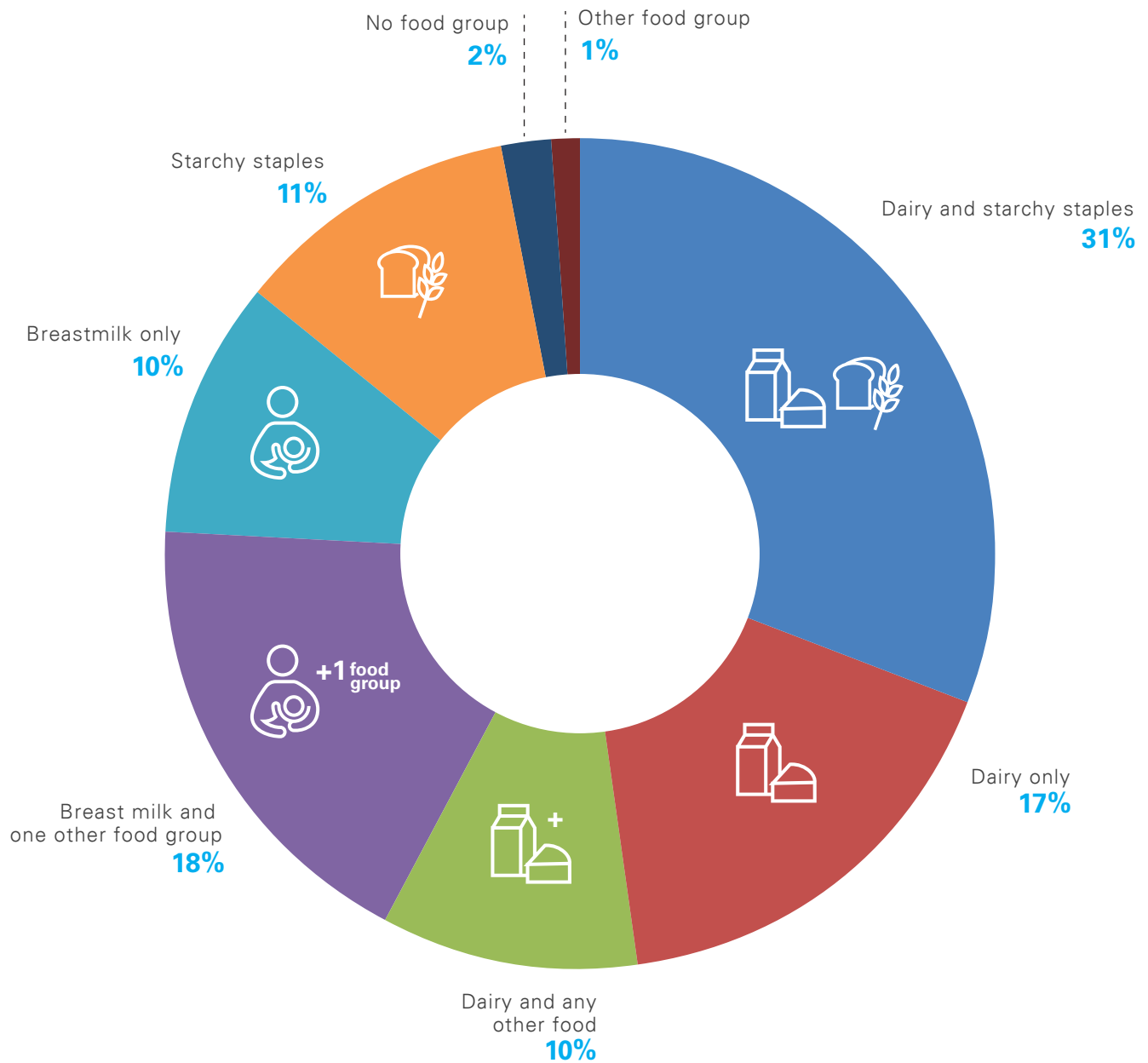
In Lebanon, dairy is one of the two food groups that children living in severe food poverty rely on to get their basic nutrition; 31% consume only dairy and starchy staples, and 17% consume only dairy and 10% consume dairy and only one other food group.

Among children above 6 months living in severe food poverty 28 per cent are being fed with only breastmilk or breastmilk and only one more food group such as dairy or starchy staples (grains, roots and tubers), while 11 per cent are only fed starchy food group. Their diets are severely lacking in nutrient-rich foods such as eggs, fish, poultry, meat, pulses, nuts, fruits and vegetables.

While exclusive breast-feeding during the first 6 months of life is the only optimum feeding practice, starting the age of 6 months children need to be fed with diverse safe and nutritious complementary food.

## Diet content of children living in severe food poverty, 2021

Source: Lebanon National SMART Nutrition Survey 2021- 2022



# A call to action

## **Bolder action and greater accountability to end child food poverty in Lebanon**

The Lebanese Government must take the lead to end child food poverty. All humanitarian and development partners, including national and international civil society and non-governmental organizations, and the private sector must mobilize and utilize the health, social protection and food systems to deliver nutritious, safe and affordable foods and essential nutrition services to guarantee every child's right to food and nutrition.

### **To end child food poverty, we must:**

#### **Leverage health systems**

to deliver essential nutrition services to young children and their mothers, prioritizing those most at risk:

- Scale up caregivers' access to timely and quality counselling on child feeding and nutrition by investing in the recruitment, training, supervision and motivation of community nutritionists and community health workers.
- Deliver food supplements, home fortificants and fortified foods to children living in food poverty and ensure access to therapeutic foods for children with life-threatening severe wasting.
- Use Primary Health Care Centers, Dispensaries, Community based platforms, and households to promote the caregivers' knowledge and practices about child feeding and nutrition.

#### **Strengthen nutrition governance**

to eliminate child food poverty, especially among fragile groups and in humanitarian context.

- Support operationalization of the national nutrition strategy<sup>10</sup> and prioritizing the elimination of child food poverty – particularly severe child food poverty – to a national priority as part of the national nutrition strategy and humanitarian nutrition response strategy and ensure coherent policy support, legislation, incentives, budgets, programmes and services across sectors and systems.
- Strengthen Lebanon's national nutrition strategy accountability to end child food poverty by setting time-bound targets and tracking progress through country- and sector- specific monitoring systems and regular household surveys, including in fragile settings.
- Align humanitarian Nutrition response with the specific nutrition needs of children living in food poverty by supporting programmes that ensure access to nutritious foods and nutrition services that meet the food and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable children.

#### **Design and activate protection systems**

that are responsive to the food and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable children and families:

- Deliver cash and social transfers sensitive to the nutritional needs of young children to end child food poverty – particularly severe food poverty in early childhood – in response to humanitarian crises.
- Use social protection programmes to improve caregivers' knowledge about child feeding and nutrition by providing education and counselling and by encouraging the use of essential nutrition services.

#### **Shape food systems** that are responsive to the food and nutrition needs of the most vulnerable children and families:

- Increase the availability and affordability of nutritious foods – including fruits, vegetables, eggs, fish, meat and fortified foods for young children – by incentivizing their production, distribution and retail.
- Implement national standards and legislation to protect young children from unhealthy processed and ultra-processed foods and beverages and harmful marketing practices targeting caregivers.

# Notes on figures

## General notes

### Population weighted governorates prevalence estimates

All governorates and sub-groups population prevalence estimates were weighted using the annual population referenced by Humanitarian response planning in Lebanon.

Population weighted prevalence estimates for any given governorate, and strata were generated by (a) multiplying the estimates of child food poverty for each governorate or strata with available data from the latest National SMART Nutrition survey published in February 2022 by the number of children in those strata.

### Number of children under 5 experiencing food poverty

UNICEF globally calculates the number of children under 5 experiencing food poverty in early childhood by taking the percentage of children aged 6 to 23 months of age who are not fed a minimum diverse diet and extrapolating that figure to the population of children under 5.

## Endnotes

1- Lebanon SMART Nutrition Survey, 2021

2- Global School-Based Student Health Survey- Lebanon, 2017

3- Lebanon: Acute Food Insecurity Situation September- December 2022

4- Guiding principles for complementary feeding of the breastfed child. Washington: Pan American Health Organization-World Health Organization; 2003.

5- Guiding principles for feeding non-breastfed children 6-24 months of age. World Health Organization.

6- Onyango AW, Borghi E, de Onis M, Casanovas Mdel C, Garza C. Complementary feeding and attained linear growth among 6–23-month-old children. *Public Health Nutr.* 2014;17(9):1975–83.

7- Prado EL, Dewey KG. Nutrition and brain development in early life. *Nutr Rev.* 2014;72(4): 267–84. doi:10.1111/nure.12102.

8- Aguayo VM, Nair R, Badgaiyan N, Krishna V. Determinants of stunting and poor linear growth in children under 2 years of age in India: an in-depth analysis of Maharashtra's comprehensive nutrition survey. *Matern Child Nutr.* 2016;12(1): 121–40.

9- Indicators for assessing infant and young child feeding practices. Definitions and measurement methods. World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2021.

10- National Nutrition Strategy, MOPH, 2022



United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)  
Lebanon Country Office  
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