



Ending Starvation: A Plan, and Its Test in 2026

Version 1.0 · Current as of September 2026 · specieslevel.com/plans/ending-starvation.html

This plan is an initial draft prepared with AI models. It is open for review by subject-matter experts and will be revised as they join the work and as world and national events change.

Introduction: a problem of access, not supply

Starvation today is almost never caused by the world running out of food. Global production is enough to feed everyone alive. People starve because they cannot get food: war blocks it, poverty prices them out, or a shock such as a drought or a price spike hits with no safety net to catch them.

That single observation shapes everything that follows. The best plan to ensure no human being starves is mostly about access, protection and politics, not about growing more calories. This essay sets out such a plan in five tiers, from stopping famine deaths now to addressing root causes over decades. It then tests each tier against the world as it stands in September 2026, when four separate shocks are landing at once: famines driven by war, a collapse in humanitarian funding, a fertilizer supply shock from the Iran war, and a strengthening El Niño.

Where the world stands

The trend is better than most people realize. According to the UN’s *State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2026* (SOFI 2026), published on July 21, 2026 by FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, about 645 million people faced hunger in 2025. That is 7.8 percent of the world’s population, down from 8.1 percent in 2024 and 8.6 percent at the 2022 peak.

Measure	Figure
People facing hunger, 2025	about 645 million (7.8% of world population)
Change since 2024	nearly 14 million fewer
Change since the 2022 peak	about 43 million fewer
Moderate or severe food insecurity, 2025	about 2.1 billion people

Measure	Figure
Unable to afford a healthy diet	about 2.7 billion people
Undernourished in Africa	about 309 million (1 in 5)
Projected hunger in 2030	about 510 to 520 million

This was the third straight year of decline, and for the first time in a decade the decline included Africa. The largest gains came in South America and Asia, especially Southern Asia.

The progress is fragile and uneven. For the first time on record, Africa has more hungry people than Asia, and rapid population growth means Africa's absolute numbers could still rise. At current rates the world will miss the Zero Hunger goal for 2030. FAO's Director-General warned that even the 2030 projection may be too optimistic, because it does not fully account for a strong El Niño or for recent cuts to development and humanitarian financing. Both of those risks are now arriving together.

Tier 1: Stop famine deaths now, and the 2026 aid cliff

The first tier of the plan is to stop people dying of famine within the next one to two years. It has three parts.

Fund the emergency system in advance. Humanitarian appeals are routinely underfunded, and money usually arrives after the television cameras do. A standing, pre-committed global famine fund, triggered automatically by early-warning thresholds such as FEWS NET forecasts and IPC Phase 4 classifications, would let aid move before people are dying.

Pre-position supplies. Grain, ready-to-use therapeutic food (RUTF) for severely malnourished children, and the capacity to make cash transfers should be stored in regional hubs near chronic hotspots.

Treat child wasting at scale. RUTF is cheap and highly effective, yet most severely malnourished children never receive it. Funding community-level screening and treatment prevents the largest share of starvation deaths.

How this tier looks in 2026

This is where the world is failing most visibly. The plan calls for pre-committed funding; what exists in 2026 is discretionary funding that is shrinking fast. In early 2025 the United States terminated roughly 90 percent of its foreign aid contracts, including \$1.4 billion in emergency nutrition funding. US contributions had made up close to half of WFP's funding in 2024. For 2026, WFP estimated it needed \$13 billion to reach 110 million people, only a

third of those in need. The UN then launched its 2026 appeal asking for just half of what it said was required, even though global humanitarian needs are at a record high.

The cuts now show up as smaller rations:

- **Syria:** WFP halved emergency food assistance and halted its nationwide bread subsidy. In Jordan it stopped cash food aid for 135,000 Syrian refugees living outside camps.
- **West Bank and Gaza:** WFP is halving the scope of its aid in the West Bank. In Gaza it cut the cash value of assistance for 375,000 people by 40 percent in July, and it needs an extra \$386 million over six months to serve about two million people.
- **South Sudan:** food assistance for about 240,000 of the most vulnerable refugees could end after September 2026, and WFP's shortfall for the rest of the year is \$258 million.
- **Elsewhere:** WFP has warned of ration cuts in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. In Haiti, shortfalls have already cost the agency its contingency stocks.

Closing this gap is the most urgent and most fixable part of the plan. The sums involved are small compared with national budgets. Plugging them before the northern winter and the southern lean season would prevent more deaths than any other single action available this year.

Tier 2: Break the link between war and starvation

Most famines today happen in conflict zones, and many are deliberate. This is the hardest part of the problem and the most important. The plan has three elements.

- **Enforce the rules that already exist.** UN Security Council Resolution 2417 condemns starvation as a method of war. It needs real consequences: targeted sanctions, prosecutions at the International Criminal Court, and conditions on arms sales.
- **Negotiate protected humanitarian corridors,** and press the parties that block aid through their allies and patrons.
- **Fund local responders,** such as community kitchens and local NGOs, who can often reach places international agencies cannot.

How this tier looks in 2026

Sudan is the world's worst hunger crisis, and sieges, not crop failure, drove its famine. In September 2025 the IPC Famine Review Committee confirmed famine in the besieged towns of El Fasher in North Darfur and Kadugli in South Kordofan. The Rapid Support Forces later took El Fasher, and tens of thousands fled. By mid-2026, famine risk had been

identified in 14 areas across North Darfur, South Darfur and South Kordofan through September, with 13 expected to stay at risk into January 2027. About 19.5 million people, 41 percent of the population, faced crisis-level hunger or worse. The number in the worst category, Catastrophe, was projected to rise from 135,000 to 200,000 during June to September 2026. FEWS NET judged that famine thresholds were no longer met in early 2026, but that re-entry into famine remained a very credible risk.

Gaza is the strongest evidence that access is the lever. In August 2025 the IPC confirmed famine in Gaza Governorate, the first famine it had ever recorded outside Africa. After the ceasefire improved food deliveries, the IPC declared in December 2025 that famine had ended. When the trucks got in, the famine reversed within months. The situation remains fragile, and the funding cuts described above now threaten those gains.

The same pattern appears elsewhere. In Haiti, gang control of roads and neighborhoods produced famine conditions in 2024. In South Sudan, 7.8 million people, 55 percent of the population, were projected to face crisis-level hunger or worse in April to July 2026. In Yemen, 17 million people face acute food insecurity amid continuing conflict.

Gaza shows that famine can be undone quickly once access is secured. Sudan shows what happens when it is not. Diplomatic pressure on Sudan's warring parties and their outside backers, to lift sieges and open corridors, belongs at the top of the agenda.

Tier 3: Build safety nets so shocks don't become hunger

Over two to ten years, the goal is to make sure that a drought, a price spike or a lost job does not turn into hunger.

- **Shock-responsive cash transfers.** Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme, Brazil's Bolsa Família and India's public food distribution system show that governments can nearly eliminate chronic hunger. Cash is usually faster and cheaper than shipping food, and it supports local markets.
- **Universal school meals.** They are cheap, politically popular and a proven way to reach children.
- **Insurance.** Index-based crop and livestock insurance, plus sovereign disaster insurance such as African Risk Capacity, can pay out before a crisis peaks.

How this tier looks in 2026: the El Niño test

An El Niño event is now under way and is expected to last at least through January 2027, possibly as a strong or very strong event. The major Southern African droughts of 1982–83, 1991–92, 1997–98 and 2015–16 all came with strong El Niños. Strong events have brought below-normal rainfall to the region about 80 percent of the time, and some

forecasts suggest this one could be stronger still. Regional forecasters expect below-normal rain across much of southern Africa early in the season.

The timing is bad. Planting in Southern Africa runs from October to December, so smallholders will go into a likely drought just as fertilizer costs far more than usual (see Tier 4). FEWS NET expects widespread crisis-level outcomes from October 2026 to January 2027 in southern Angola, southern and central Malawi, southern Mozambique and the Grand Sud of Madagascar. El Niño is also driving crop failures in Central America and East Africa.

There is one buffer. Southern Africa's 2026 cereal harvest reached 43.4 million tonnes, nearly 10 percent above the five-year average. That creates a window for exactly the anticipatory approach this tier recommends: pre-positioned supplies, drought-tolerant seed, and cash transfers triggered by forecasts rather than by visible hunger. Acting now costs far less than responding after harvests fail in early 2027.

Tier 4: Make food systems resilient and markets stable

Over five to twenty years, the aim is food systems that can absorb shocks.

- **Invest in smallholder farmers:** drought-tolerant seeds, irrigation, soil health, extension services, secure land rights, and roads and storage that cut post-harvest losses. Most of the world's hungry people are rural producers themselves.
- **Adapt to climate change,** with climate-resilient agriculture and water management, especially in the Sahel, the Horn of Africa and South Asia.
- **Stabilize markets.** Discourage food export bans during crises, maintain regional grain reserves, and protect fertilizer supply chains so price spikes do not fall hardest on poor importers.

How this tier looks in 2026: the Hormuz fertilizer shock

This is the biggest new factor of 2026. The United States and Israel went to war with Iran on February 28, 2026, and Iran effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz. Urea, a key nitrogen fertilizer, roughly doubled in price within weeks. The Gulf supplies nearly a quarter of global urea exports, and no strategic fertilizer stockpiles exist anywhere in the world to cover the loss. China had also effectively suspended phosphate exports from December 2025 through August 2026. The World Bank projected its fertilizer price index would rise more than 30 percent in 2026, with urea up nearly 60 percent.

So far the damage is delayed rather than immediate. Unlike in 2008 or 2022, grain prices have stayed roughly flat while fertilizer and energy prices climbed. But farmers facing costlier inputs during the spring 2026 planting season used less fertilizer, which will lower yields and push food prices up well into 2027. FAO has warned that the closure could

trigger a severe global food price crisis within six to twelve months. High oil prices also make biofuels more profitable, which can pull land and crops away from food.

The diplomatic picture remains unresolved. A ceasefire in April and a deal in June briefly allowed limited traffic, but as of late September the strait is again effectively closed to commercial shipping, with Brent crude around \$104 a barrel. On September 25, Iran's foreign minister offered a seven-day plan to reopen the strait in exchange for lifting the US blockade and sanctions. President Trump rejected it.

The crisis exposes a gap in this tier. Three additions follow:

1. **International fertilizer reserves.** Grain reserves exist in many countries, but fertilizer has no equivalent buffer.
2. **Rules against export restrictions on fertilizer, not just food.**
3. **Rapid balance-of-payments support** from the IMF and other lenders for countries hit by higher fertilizer and food-import bills.

Reopening Hormuz is itself one of the most important food-security interventions available right now, even though it is usually discussed only as an oil story.

Tier 5: Address root causes

The deepest tier deals with why people are vulnerable in the first place.

- **Reduce extreme poverty** through jobs, debt relief for food-importing countries, and fair trade terms.
- **Strengthen governance and accountability.** Amartya Sen's well-known finding is that functioning democracies with a free press rarely suffer famines, because governments that must answer to voters and journalists cannot ignore mass hunger.
- **Improve women's education and control of household resources.** This is one of the strongest predictors of child nutrition.
- **Collect better real-time data,** such as satellite crop monitoring and market prices, so that no famine goes undetected.

The events of 2026 underline these points. Sudan's famine grew out of a collapse of governance, not a lack of food. The Hormuz shock hits hardest in countries that already carry high debt and import both food and fuel. And the early warnings about El Niño show that the data systems largely work; the weak link is turning warnings into funded action.

A reprioritized agenda for the next 6-12 months

Applied to the world of September 2026, the five tiers point to five immediate priorities, in order:

1. **Close the humanitarian funding gap now**, especially for Sudan, South Sudan, Gaza, Haiti and Yemen, so that ration cuts do not turn into deaths.
2. **Push for siege-lifting and aid access in Sudan**, using Gaza's recovery as the precedent for how fast famine can reverse.
3. **Launch El Niño early action in Southern Africa before October-December planting**, combining seed, fertilizer support and forecast-triggered cash.
4. **Treat the fertilizer shock as a food crisis**: secure alternative shipping routes, discourage export bans, provide balance-of-payments support, and start building fertilizer reserves for next time.
5. **Treat a Hormuz settlement as a food-security priority**, not only an energy one.

On timelines, eliminating famine is achievable within a few years if access and funding are secured. Ending chronic undernourishment would take longer, likely one to two decades of sustained investment.

Conclusion

The events of 2026 support the plan's core claim: starvation is mainly a problem of access and politics. The three biggest threats right now are war, in Sudan and around Iran; political decisions to cut aid; and a climate shock that forecasters saw coming months in advance. None of them is a shortage of food.

Money is not the binding constraint either. The extra annual spending needed to end hunger is estimated in the tens of billions of dollars, a small fraction of global military budgets or agricultural subsidies. The real constraints are political will and conflict.

Three years of falling hunger show that the tools work. Gaza's recovery shows that even a declared famine can be reversed within months once food gets through. The open question for 2027 is whether governments keep funding and using those tools while these shocks overlap.

These situations are moving quickly, especially the Hormuz negotiations, so some details in this essay may be out of date within weeks.

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