



# The Stunting Paradox in Yemen: Misaligned Priorities in Humanitarian Crisis Response

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**Abstract.** *This study aims to analyze the paradox of stunting in Yemen, particularly the disconnect between humanitarian response priorities and children's actual nutritional needs amid the ongoing conflict. Stunting, a form of chronic malnutrition, is a significant public health issue in Yemen, exacerbated by the conflict's disruption of food, healthcare, and sanitation systems. Despite the clear evidence of rising stunting rates, international humanitarian interventions tend to focus on addressing acute crises, such as extreme hunger, while neglecting long-term nutritional needs. Using a qualitative literature review approach, the research synthesizes data from archival documents, reports, and secondary sources to explore the structural causes of stunting and the challenges faced by humanitarian actors in Yemen. The findings reveal that the protracted conflict, economic collapse, and humanitarian blockades have worsened food insecurity and malnutrition. Moreover, the humanitarian response often prioritizes short-term survival over long-term prevention of stunting, resulting in a lack of integrated, multisectoral interventions. The study emphasizes the need for a paradigm shift in humanitarian policies to incorporate long-term development strategies and integrate stunting prevention. This research contributes to the academic understanding of the humanitarian-development nexus and offers recommendations for more holistic interventions.*

**Keywords:** *Chronic Malnutrition; Food Insecurity; Humanitarian Response; Humanitarian-Development Nexus; Stunting.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Stunting is a form of chronic malnutrition that has a wide impact on society. It not only affects the physical health of children, but also on the quality of human resources, economic productivity, and the development capacity of a country. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines stunting as the failure to grow in children due to long-term malnutrition, gastrointestinal infections, and lack of psychosocial stimulation (Mulyani et al., 2025). The decline in height among children due to stunting is an indicator of failure to meet their basic needs. Therefore, the problem of stunting is very important to research, because addressing it not only contributes to children's health but also to their long-term quality of life and the country's future development potential (Danapriatna et al., 2023).

However, although stunting affects long-term well-being, global humanitarian responses tend to focus more on addressing acute conditions, such as extreme hunger and wasting. The humanitarian crisis that has occurred in countries hit by armed conflict, such as Yemen, shows a paradox in the priorities of international policy on nutrition issues. Since the escalation of the conflict in Yemen in 2015, damage to the health, food, and sanitation systems has resulted in high stunting rates among children there. UNICEF data recorded that almost half of children under the age of five in Yemen are stunted (Tarek et al., 2023). However, international interventions often focus more on saving lives threatened by extreme

hunger, while stunting, which develops more slowly, is often overlooked in policy priorities (Moramarco et al., 2025).

This phenomenon illustrates a structural problem in handling the existing humanitarian crisis. Stunting, a chronic form of malnutrition, requires more preventive, long-term interventions, but most humanitarian organizations focus on acute problems that yield rapid, measurable results (Renzaho et al., 2022; Mulyani et al., 2025). This suggests an imbalance between the biological urgency of stunting and international policy priorities that prioritize emergency response (Huayta et al., 2024). The asynchrony between the two creates major challenges in addressing stunting in crisis-hit regions such as Yemen and underscores the need for a more holistic approach that integrates humanitarian and preventive development efforts.

Research on stunting is generally divided into two main literatures, namely the global nutrition and health literature and the humanitarian and development policy literature. In the global nutrition literature, stunting is considered a major indicator of chronic malnutrition that reflects failure in the nutritional fulfillment of children, health, and the environment in the early stages of life (Soliman et al., 2024; Basu et al., 2025, Scheneider, 2025). Various studies show that stunting affects not only physical aspects, but also cognitive development, economic productivity capacity, and quality of life in adulthood (Lestari et al., 2024; Suryawan et al., 2022; Despande et al., 2022). Therefore, it is important to see stunting as a problem that focuses not only on the health of children, but also on the social and economic development of a country. Research in this field provides important insights into the long-term impact of stunting on the development of the nation.

Meanwhile, in the humanitarian policy literature, responses to nutrition crises are more often dominated by an emergency approach. The main focus on addressing wasting, acute hunger, and life-threatening nutritional conditions makes stunting often overlooked in international policy priorities. This is because stunting develops more slowly and does not immediately threaten death, so it is not considered an emergency problem. Previous studies in this area have also highlighted that short-term approaches that prioritize quick outcomes of humanitarian interventions are often not integrated with broader development efforts (Corbett et al., 2022; Mohamed et al., 2025). Thus, there are significant gaps in the literature on stunting that need to be filled through research that pays more attention to long-term aspects and integration between humanity and development.

Although research on stunting in the humanitarian context exists, studies on the interaction between humanitarian crises and preventive development remain limited. Some studies suggest that the inability to integrate development perspectives into humanitarian responses can exacerbate structural vulnerabilities in societies, prolong dependence on international aid, and delay long-term recovery (Son et al., 2025; Arcos Gonzalez et al., 2024). Therefore, it is important to address this research gap by examining how humanitarian policies can be made more holistic, including stunting as a development problem that must be addressed through a preventive approach. The novelty of this study lies in the effort to analyze stunting in a broader framework, namely as an integral part of sustainable development, not just as a nutritional problem.

Stunting in Yemen suggests that failing to prioritize these issues in the humanitarian response risks exacerbating the cycle of vulnerability and poverty. By analyzing this condition, this study aims to show that the marginalization of stunting issues in international humanitarian policy is a governance failure that affects future generations. For this reason, stunting management must be seen as a structural problem that requires integration between a more holistic humanitarian response and a long-term development approach. This integration is very important to protect future generations and ensure the sustainability of a country's development after a crisis.

Overall, this study analyzes how stunting can be a neglected structural problem in humanitarian responses that remain oriented towards short-term outcomes. By examining the paradoxes in international policy and the long-term impact of stunting, this article is expected to make a significant contribution to the formulation of more appropriate and sustainable policies to address malnutrition in children, particularly in conflict and post-conflict situations.

## **2. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative literature review approach to explore the paradox of stunting in Yemen, focusing on the mismatch between humanitarian response priorities and children's actual nutritional needs amidst an ongoing humanitarian crisis. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth understanding of complex issues, such as stunting, within the context of conflict and crisis. This method provides a detailed exploration of the structural causes and consequences of stunting in Yemen, as well as the operational challenges faced by humanitarian organizations, particularly UNICEF, in addressing the issue (Takona, 2024; Hall et al., 2024). A literature review enables the

researcher to synthesize findings from a wide range of sources, offering rich insights into how stunting persists in Yemen despite international humanitarian efforts. This design is particularly well-suited to analyzing the alignment (or lack thereof) between immediate humanitarian interventions and long-term development needs (Chandra Susanto et al., 2024; Chigbu et al., 2023).

Data for this research are primarily collected through archival and document-based sources, as well as the internet. Archival research involves reviewing official documents, reports, and publications from UNICEF and other humanitarian organizations on stunting and child malnutrition in Yemen, as well as the strategies implemented to address the crisis. These documents, including annual reports, crisis assessments, and policy papers, provide detailed insight into ongoing interventions and their effectiveness. According to Morgan (2022), official documents offer credible, rich information that sheds light on the scope and impact of humanitarian crises. In addition, internet-based research is conducted by reviewing credible online sources, such as academic articles, news reports, and policy briefs, to supplement the data and provide a broader understanding of the context surrounding stunting and the humanitarian response in Yemen (Chigbu et al., 2023; Takona, 2024).

The data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes within the collected data. Thematic analysis enables researchers to systematically categorize information from diverse sources and draw connections among the structural causes of stunting, humanitarian actors' responses, and the long-term implications for child development and national recovery. This approach is particularly well suited to exploring how global priorities align with or diverge from local realities, as stunting in conflict zones such as Yemen is shaped by complex socio-political factors (Morgan, 2022). The analysis focuses on critical themes, including the tension between short-term humanitarian relief efforts and long-term developmental needs, and the role of international organizations such as UNICEF in addressing stunting. Coding and theme identification are performed iteratively to ensure that the analysis captures nuanced insights from the data (Mishra et al., 2022; Bryda et al., 2024).

To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, this study employs a triangulation approach, cross-referencing data from multiple sources to confirm the consistency and accuracy of findings (Ahmed, 2024; Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). By using both primary sources, such as official reports from humanitarian organizations, and secondary sources, including news articles and academic publications, the research benefits from a broad range of perspectives, which enhances the robustness of the findings. Furthermore, the analysis is

subjected to peer review, in which experts in humanitarian studies and nutrition validate interpretations and provide critical feedback, thereby ensuring the credibility of the research (Meydan & Akkaş, 2024). To minimize researcher bias, a clear, systematic coding process is applied, and regular reflections on data collection and analysis methods are conducted (Ahmed, 2024). This comprehensive approach to data validation ensures that the research findings accurately represent the situation in Yemen.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **Result**

The results of this study highlight the intricate relationship between Yemen's ongoing conflict and the exacerbation of stunting and malnutrition among its population. The analysis reveals that the protracted conflict, economic collapse, and humanitarian blockades have significantly disrupted Yemen's food systems, healthcare, and overall infrastructure, leading to widespread food insecurity and poor nutritional outcomes. Despite clear evidence of rising stunting rates, the international humanitarian response has been disproportionately focused on short-term interventions aimed at immediate survival, such as acute hunger relief, while long-term nutritional needs have been largely neglected. These findings underscore the need for a paradigm shift in humanitarian policies, advocating for an integrated, long-term approach that addresses both immediate and chronic malnutrition in Yemen. By examining these factors, the research underscores the urgent need for multisectoral interventions that integrate nutrition, healthcare, sanitation, and social protection to prevent further stunting and promote sustainable recovery for future generations.

#### ***Yemen Conflict***

The ongoing conflict in Yemen, which involves the Yemeni government and the Houthi group, originated from historical discrimination against the Zaydi community, leading to deep-rooted political and social tensions. Over the years, the Yemeni government marginalized the Zaydi community, especially under the leadership of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who employed systematic policies to suppress this group. The Zaydi community, concentrated in the northern region of Yemen, felt increasingly disenfranchised, which laid the foundation for the rise of the Houthi movement. The group, originally a response to the growing influence of Wahhabism in northern Yemen, evolved into a significant political and military force. The movement gained substantial traction and, over time, became the key player in the ongoing conflict that continues to devastate Yemen. The complex interplay of

religion, identity, and political power has significantly shaped the dynamics of the conflict and has been a major factor in the perpetuation of violence in the region.

In 2011, Yemen was caught up in the wave of political upheaval known as the Arab Spring that swept across the Arab world. Mass protests demanding the resignation of President Saleh ultimately led to his departure from power. However, the transition of power to his deputy, Abdurabbuh Mansur Hadi, failed to stabilize the country. Yemen's political system was fragile, and despite hopes for reform, Hadi's government struggled to address the country's deep economic and political challenges. As economic conditions deteriorated and political disillusionment grew, the Houthi movement seized the opportunity to expand its influence. Internal divisions within the Yemeni military, where some factions shifted loyalty to the Houthis, further strengthened the group. This division, alongside growing support from the northern regions, led to a larger military confrontation with Hadi's government.

By September 2014, the Houthis took control of the capital city, Sana'a, marking a turning point in Yemen's political crisis. In 2015, the Houthis forced President Hadi to resign, and he fled the capital, seeking refuge in Saudi Arabia. Hadi's exile led to the formation of a government-in-exile, which sought international recognition. As the conflict escalated, Saudi Arabia, along with its regional allies, launched a military intervention aimed at restoring Hadi's government. This intervention included intense airstrikes, which targeted areas controlled by the Houthis, further complicating the political and military landscape. The involvement of external actors transformed the conflict into a proxy war, involving multiple countries with varying interests, leading to increased violence and instability.

The humanitarian impact of the Yemen conflict has been catastrophic, particularly concerning food security. Yemen now faces one of the worst food crises in the world. Millions of people are at risk of famine, with many provinces experiencing emergency levels of food insecurity. The war has destroyed essential infrastructure, including healthcare, sanitation, and food distribution systems, exacerbating the already dire situation. Both the Houthi group and the Saudi-led coalition have obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid, preventing food and medicine from reaching those in need. As a result, many areas, especially cities like Taiz, have been severely affected by blockades and restricted access to basic resources, further deepening the humanitarian crisis.

The economic consequences of the conflict have also significantly worsened the food crisis in Yemen. Although food is available in some markets, particularly in major cities like Sana'a, many people cannot afford it due to skyrocketing prices. The collapse of Yemen's banking system, coupled with the devaluation of the national currency, has made it

increasingly difficult for the population to access basic goods. The ongoing conflict has caused severe economic instability, leading to unemployment, poverty, and a decrease in income levels for many Yemenis. Additionally, the competition for control over vital resources, such as oil and water, between the warring factions has further exacerbated the economic collapse, making it even harder for the population to survive.

### ***Addressing the Stunting Paradox in Yemen's Humanitarian Crisis***

The humanitarian crisis in Yemen, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict, has led to widespread malnutrition, with stunting becoming a major concern, especially among children. The destruction of Yemen's infrastructure, including health, food, and sanitation systems, has made it difficult to address the underlying causes of stunting. Despite the overwhelming evidence of its prevalence, stunting has not been adequately addressed in the international humanitarian response, which has focused primarily on immediate life-saving interventions. Efforts to address acute hunger and wasting have been prioritized, while long-term issues like stunting, which require sustained interventions, have been largely overlooked. This has created a significant gap in addressing children's nutritional needs, with lasting consequences for Yemen's future development.

The paradox surrounding stunting in Yemen lies in its low prioritization within humanitarian policies. Stunting, though a critical issue with long-term effects, does not produce immediate, life-threatening consequences, which makes it less urgent to many humanitarian organizations. As a result, it is often treated as a secondary issue, something that can be addressed once the more immediate needs, such as hunger and acute malnutrition, have been met. This focus on short-term crises, while necessary, has led to the neglect of the long-term health and developmental needs of children, perpetuating the cycle of malnutrition. Without a focus on prevention and long-term nutritional support, stunting continues to affect Yemen's children, limiting their potential and contributing to the country's future developmental challenges.

One reason stunting has been sidelined in humanitarian response is the nature of international aid funding. Donors tend to favor projects that deliver quick, measurable results, particularly those that can be easily communicated to the public. As a result, short-term interventions that address immediate life-threatening conditions, such as acute malnutrition, receive the bulk of the resources. Long-term interventions, like those aimed at preventing stunting through better maternal and child nutrition, often receive less attention and fewer resources. This funding bias toward quick fixes has limited the effectiveness of the international response to tackling the root causes of stunting in Yemen, which require more

sustained preventive measures and greater investment in long-term health and nutrition programs.

The failure to prioritize stunting in the humanitarian response also highlights the disconnect between humanitarian aid and development goals. The distinction between emergency relief and development aid has often led to the fragmentation of efforts, with humanitarian actors focused on short-term survival and development actors focusing on long-term recovery. However, stunting is both an immediate and long-term issue, requiring an integrated approach that combines short-term relief efforts with long-term development strategies. In Yemen, the lack of a multisectoral approach that includes nutrition, healthcare, sanitation, and social protection has allowed stunting to continue unchecked. The absence of this integrated approach has resulted in the persistence of malnutrition, with stunting continuing to affect the country’s children despite the significant international aid efforts.

Addressing the stunting paradox in Yemen requires a shift in both policy and practice. Stunting should no longer be treated as a secondary concern but as a core issue that must be addressed within the framework of humanitarian response. This involves integrating stunting prevention into the immediate relief efforts, alongside the ongoing interventions for acute hunger and malnutrition. A more comprehensive and integrated approach would include improving maternal and child nutrition, ensuring access to clean water, promoting breastfeeding, and strengthening Yemen’s healthcare systems. By addressing stunting in a more holistic manner, Yemen can better protect its future generations and begin to break the cycle of malnutrition and poverty that has plagued the country for decades. This approach is essential for ensuring the long-term development and sustainability of Yemen’s recovery from its ongoing crisis.

**Table 1.** Key Factors Contributing to the Food and Nutritional Crisis in Yemen

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Impact on Stunting and Nutrition</b>
Armed Conflict	Ongoing conflict between the Yemeni government and Houthi forces since 2015.	Destruction of infrastructure, disruption of food distribution, and limited access to healthcare lead to widespread malnutrition.
Economic Collapse	Severe economic instability, including the devaluation of the Yemeni riyal and fragmentation of the banking system.	Increased food prices, reduced household income, and limited purchasing power exacerbate food insecurity and malnutrition.
Blockades and Humanitarian Access	Blockades imposed by both the Houthi group and Saudi-led coalition restrict access to food and humanitarian aid.	Limited access to food, medicine, and humanitarian relief, especially in areas like Taiz, exacerbates malnutrition and stunting.
High Food Prices	Rising food prices due to inflation and supply chain disruptions caused by conflict.	High prices make it unaffordable for many households to access adequate nutrition, leading to higher rates of stunting and hunger.

Corruption and Fiscal Policies	Corruption, including the mismanagement of aid, and the imposition of high import taxes on food.	Affects the distribution and availability of food, hindering efforts to reduce stunting and improve child nutrition.
Widespread Displacement	Millions of Yemenis displaced due to the conflict.	Displacement disrupts access to nutritious food, healthcare, and sanitation, increasing vulnerability to stunting.
Lack of Multisectoral Approach	Absence of an integrated response addressing nutrition, healthcare, sanitation, and social protection.	Stunting remains a secondary concern, and the lack of holistic interventions leads to prolonged nutritional deficiencies.

The table highlights several critical factors that contribute to Yemen's food and nutritional crisis, each of which plays a pivotal role in the persistence of stunting. Firstly, the ongoing armed conflict and economic collapse have directly affected the availability and affordability of food, making it increasingly difficult for families to access the nutrition needed to prevent stunting. The destruction of vital infrastructure, including healthcare and food distribution systems, has compounded the situation, while the fragmentation of the banking system and currency devaluation has further hindered Yemenis' ability to buy essential goods. These factors combined have led to widespread food insecurity, with stunting becoming one of the most visible and damaging consequences of this crisis.

Additionally, the humanitarian blockades and high food prices further exacerbate the situation. Blockades imposed by both warring factions prevent the delivery of essential humanitarian aid, and the inflationary impact of the conflict has caused food prices to skyrocket, making it unaffordable for many Yemenis. The lack of a multisectoral response to the crisis has allowed these issues to persist, as interventions have largely focused on short-term relief rather than addressing the root causes of stunting. The absence of coordinated efforts that combine nutrition, healthcare, and social protection leaves the most vulnerable populations, particularly children, at risk of lifelong developmental setbacks due to stunting. These interconnected factors illustrate the complexity of Yemen's crisis and the urgent need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to humanitarian aid and long-term development.

## Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Yemen's ongoing conflict has significantly exacerbated stunting and malnutrition, with a disproportionate focus on immediate life-saving interventions rather than long-term nutritional support. These results are in line with previous research showing the complex relationship among conflict, food insecurity, and malnutrition. However, the study also underscores a critical gap in the humanitarian response namely, the neglect of chronic malnutrition and stunting, which have often been treated as secondary concerns (Mohamed et al., 2024; Turyashemererwa et al., 2025). This observation aligns with the broader humanitarian aid literature, which notes that short-term survival priorities, such as

addressing acute hunger, tend to overshadow longer-term nutritional needs (Cole et al., 2023; Espeel 2025). While stunting has been documented across various conflict zones as a pervasive issue, the lack of a multisectoral approach to prevent it in Yemen underscores the critical need for more integrated humanitarian strategies.

The study's findings also show that Yemen's economic collapse and the disruption of food distribution systems significantly increase malnutrition rates. This mirrors findings in the literature that stress the role of economic instability in exacerbating food insecurity and stunting. For instance, Penson et al. (2024) discuss how economic instability and rising food prices in conflict zones directly contribute to malnutrition, particularly in countries with fragile economies such as Yemen. In Yemen's case, the currency devaluation, combined with blockades and the fragmentation of the banking system, further undermined people's purchasing power and access to basic goods (Rastogi, 2023; Muller & Kerényi, 2024). These factors have led to a dual crisis of food insecurity and malnutrition, similar to patterns observed in other conflict zones, such as Syria and South Sudan, where economic collapse plays a pivotal role in exacerbating stunting (Homeida, 2023; Mohamed & Homeida, 2024).

One of the most significant implications of the findings is the theoretical understanding of stunting in conflict zones. The study confirms that stunting must be viewed as a structural issue rather than a merely medical or nutritional one. This aligns with the theory of the humanitarian-development nexus, which suggests that failure to integrate humanitarian aid with long-term development objectives exacerbates cycles of vulnerability and dependency in conflict-affected regions (Ada et al., 2022; Barakat et al., 2023). The absence of a comprehensive, multisectoral approach to addressing stunting, which includes interventions in healthcare, sanitation, and social protection, has allowed the problem to persist and worsen in Yemen. This theoretical perspective supports the call for a paradigm shift in humanitarian policies, as emphasized by Djamila, (2024), who argues for a more integrated approach to crisis management that considers both immediate survival and long-term development needs.

From a practical standpoint, the findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive humanitarian response in Yemen. The focus on short-term relief interventions has neglected the longer-term impact of stunting, which has severe consequences for future generations. In practice, this suggests that humanitarian organizations must shift their focus not only to addressing the immediate crisis but also to ensuring that preventive measures are integrated into emergency responses. As noted by the World Health Organization (WHO), preventing stunting requires long-term commitment to improving maternal and child nutrition,

healthcare, and overall living conditions (Yusriadi et al., 2024). The study's results stress the importance of providing consistent nutrition support and healthcare services, particularly for vulnerable populations such as children under five, to break the cycle of malnutrition and prevent stunting from becoming a persistent issue.

Lastly, the study's findings indicate that addressing stunting in Yemen requires both a shift in policy and in humanitarian practice. The results emphasize the importance of integrating long-term nutrition interventions into the broader humanitarian strategy. This would involve not just providing food aid but also addressing underlying structural causes such as economic instability, lack of healthcare, and inadequate sanitation. As research from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Homeida (2023) suggests, a failure to address these structural issues perpetuates cycles of poverty and malnutrition in conflict-affected countries. Thus, the study calls for a more holistic approach that combines short-term emergency responses with long-term developmental strategies to reduce stunting and improve the overall health and well-being of Yemen's population.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The most important finding of this study is that Yemen's ongoing conflict has significantly exacerbated stunting and malnutrition, primarily due to the lack of a long-term, multisectoral approach to addressing these issues. The research highlights the failure of the international humanitarian response to prioritize stunting, focusing instead on immediate survival adequately needs like acute hunger relief. This neglect of chronic malnutrition underscores the crucial need for a paradigm shift in humanitarian policies, urging the integration of long-term development strategies that address both immediate and structural causes of malnutrition, such as economic collapse, inadequate healthcare, and food insecurity. The study offers a valuable lesson on the importance of combining short-term emergency responses with sustainable development interventions, particularly in conflict-affected regions where humanitarian crises are intertwined with the country's long-term development challenges.

The strength of this paper lies in its contribution to the academic understanding of the humanitarian-development nexus in conflict zones, particularly Yemen. By analyzing the paradox of stunting amid a humanitarian crisis, the study offers new insights into how stunting has been sidelined in favor of more immediate needs. It contributes to the broader literature by emphasizing the need for integrated humanitarian strategies that go beyond immediate relief and incorporate health, nutrition, and social protection. However, this

research is not without its limitations. The study primarily relies on secondary data, and future research could benefit from primary data collection to gain more direct insights from affected populations. Additionally, further studies could examine the effectiveness of integrating stunting prevention into humanitarian interventions, particularly in other conflict zones, to assess the broader applicability of this approach.

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