



DRAFT¹

Afghanistan Nutrition Dialogues Country-Level Synthesis

1. Introduction

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan, spearheaded by World Vision International (WVI) and the 4SD Foundation, was launched to address the global challenge of malnutrition, particularly among vulnerable groups such as women and children in low-income households. This initiative utilises the multistakeholder dialogue methodology developed by 4SD, which was utilised during the UN Food Systems Summit of 2021. The initiative seeks to incorporate insights from individuals directly impacted by food insecurity and malnutrition, creating a more grounded approach.

1.1 Background and rationale

Afghanistan faces significant nutritional challenges driven by a complex interplay of climate change, economic instability, and structural barriers. These factors disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, particularly women, children, and rural communities, who experience high rates of food insecurity and malnutrition. According to recent data, approximately 14.2 million people in Afghanistan (34% of the population) are facing high levels of acute food insecurity as of February 2025 (1,2). The World Food Programme reports that two-thirds of female-headed families struggle to afford basic nutrition, with restrictions on women's access to education, work, and public spaces exacerbating the

1. Country-level syntheses were completed for 25 countries that held four or more Nutrition Dialogues and submitted feedback forms by December 31, 2024. Artificial intelligence (AI) was used to analyse the National Dialogues data and identify emerging themes from the feedback forms. Human review was then performed. This is a draft awaiting further validation from the country level. Countries can add additional info and use the reports for their own advocacy purposes.

situation (3). Furthermore, nearly 3.5 million children aged 6 to 59 months are projected to suffer from acute malnutrition between June 2024 and May 2025 (4).

The situation is particularly concerning in certain regions. Afghanistan ranks fourth on the list of countries most at risk of climate-related crisis and is considered the seventh most vulnerable country with the least coping capacity (1). Climate shocks, such as droughts and floods, have severely impacted rain-dependent agriculture and caused widespread destruction of homes, agricultural lands, and livestock (1,5). Despite being the most affected, these groups often have limited opportunities to influence policies and interventions aimed at improving their nutritional status. The cost of food remains a critical issue, with WFP requiring US\$652 million to support Afghanistan's most vulnerable families up to June 2025 (3). The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan seek to address this gap by providing structured platforms for these underrepresented voices to express their needs and priorities, ensuring that efforts to combat malnutrition are both equitable and sustainable.

This initiative is particularly timely as it aligns with the global momentum toward addressing malnutrition, highlighted by the upcoming Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit in Paris in March 2025 (6). By integrating lived experiences into the summit discussions, the initiative ensures that the resulting policies and actions are grounded in the realities faced by those most at risk. It also lays the groundwork for sustained advocacy and accountability beyond the summit, supporting local and national efforts to address malnutrition effectively.

1.2 Goals

Through a series of structured dialogues, the initiative seeks to:

1. Engage diverse stakeholders, including children, women, small-scale farmers, and faith leaders, in identifying actionable solutions for better nutrition.
2. Elevate these perspectives to influence global and national decision-making processes, particularly in the lead-up to and aftermath of the N4G Summit.
3. Foster a sense of shared accountability among policymakers, practitioners, and communities, ensuring that commitments made during the summit translate into tangible outcomes.

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan represent a transformative approach to addressing the systemic challenges of malnutrition and promoting sustainable health and well-being for vulnerable populations by enhancing equity, participation, and evidence-based advocacy.

1.3 Amplifying marginalised voices in the fight against malnutrition

Acknowledging the perspectives of marginalised groups is important for addressing food insecurity and malnutrition in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), as these groups often experience the most severe impacts of systemic inequities in food systems. However, their perspectives are usually neglected and ignored when designing policies and programmes that seek to serve them. Research shows that incorporating the lived experiences of women, smallholder farmers, and other vulnerable groups enhances the

relevance and effectiveness of interventions by aligning them with local realities and cultural contexts (7). Additionally, participatory approaches have been associated with improved social accountability and better targeting of resources, reducing inequities in access to nutritious food (8). Marginalised groups often hold critical insights into barriers to food security, such as gendered disparities in access to land and resources, which are central to designing inclusive and impactful solutions (9).

2. Method

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan employ two methodologies to engage stakeholders and children in addressing nutrition challenges. The first method is stakeholder dialogues and the second is children's workshops.

2.1 Stakeholder Dialogues

Stakeholder Dialogues brought together diverse groups of 30–40 participants, representing stakeholders such as women, farmers, civil society, businesses, and government officials. These dialogues aimed to explore local nutrition challenges and identify actionable solutions. The events were structured into three phases: an opening session, discussion groups, and a consolidation session.

During the opening session, a convener set the scene by presenting local nutrition data and framing the dialogue's purpose. Participants then engaged in smaller discussion groups, each facilitated by a trained leader who ensured inclusive participation and encouraged exchanging ideas using pre-defined topics and open-ended questions. A record keeper documented the discussions, noting points of agreement and divergence. The consolidation phase brought participants back together to summarise and synthesise outcomes, with the convener providing an overarching analysis to connect discussions to broader goals. Stakeholder dialogues emphasise diversity, confidentiality (using Chatham House Rules), and structured reporting via standardised feedback forms. The convener completed the feedback form and uploaded it to the [Nutrition Dialogues](#) portal (11).

2.2 Children's workshop

The children's workshop method was designed for 12–20 children and young people aged 12–18, creating a safe and engaging space to discuss nutrition issues. Workshops were structured into four segments: an opening with icebreakers, an exploration of good nourishment, the development of ideas and solutions, and a closing session.

Conveners initiated the workshops with introductory activities to create a relaxed atmosphere, followed by discussions on key nutrition concepts. Participants engaged in exploratory activities, such as analysing photographs or creating drawings to express their understanding of good nourishment. In the ideas and solutions phase, children collaborated to create collages visualising potential actions to improve nutrition, which they presented to the group. Workshops concluded with a summary of discussions and acknowledgment of contributions.

Safeguarding was central to the children's workshop methodology, with conveners required to adhere to strict child protection standards, including consent processes and risk management plans. Both the stakeholder dialogues and children's workshops prioritised inclusivity, respect for diverse perspectives, and systematic documentation of outcomes for synthesis and further action. The feedback forms were then uploaded to the [Nutrition Dialogues](#) portal (11).

2.3 Data analysis process

We used artificial intelligence (AI) to analyse the data and identify emerging themes from the feedback forms. Using AI, the feedback forms were compiled into a structured format for processing. A pre-trained generative transformer (GPT) was created based on UNICEF's Conceptual Framework of Causes of Malnutrition to conceptualise the key determinants of malnutrition – immediate triggers and underlying risk factors – ensuring a systematic analysis of themes related to nutrition challenges and solutions.

Qualitative textual data, including participant responses and discussion summaries, was pre-processed using Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques (12). Latent Dirichlet Allocation was employed to extract recurring themes by identifying patterns in word usage and contextual similarities (13). Sentiment analysis was applied to classify feedback as positive, negative, or neutral, offering additional insights into participants' attitudes and experiences (14). The AI also identifies co-occurrence relationships, highlighting connections between themes and specific participant demographics or geographic locations.

To ensure the accuracy of the findings, the generated themes and sentiments were reviewed against the original text data to validate the AI's interpretation. This fully AI-driven process allowed for efficient and scalable thematic analysis, enabling the rapid identification of actionable insights and emerging trends from large feedback datasets.

The malnutrition and food insecurity situation in Afghanistan

The malnutrition and food insecurity crisis in Afghanistan is exacerbated by a confluence of factors including climate change, economic instability, and structural barriers. The interplay of these factors creates a cyclical pattern of food insecurity and malnutrition, where environmental shocks and socio-economic instability perpetuate the crisis. Marginalised communities, particularly women and children, are disproportionately affected.

Marginalised populations bear the brunt of food insecurity, as evidenced by their high malnutrition rates, with the most vulnerable groups including subsistence farmers, female headed families, and those living in poverty. Despite their crucial role in the country's food system, these groups often have limited opportunities to influence policies and interventions aimed at improving their nutritional status. In the context of climate change-related shocks such as increased droughts, unpredictable rainfall patterns, and changes in seasonal temperatures that affect food production (1), the agricultural sector, which is the primary means of livelihood for nearly 80% of Afghans, is particularly vulnerable (5). During the projected period, the food security crisis is expected to worsen (3).

3. Results

3.1 Framework and participants

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan engaged 238 participants across eight provincial-level dialogues held in Qala-e-Naw, Maymana, Chagcharan, and Herat. These dialogues aimed to amplify children's voices on nutrition, assess local food security challenges, and explore policy solutions to combat malnutrition. Participants included children (12-18 years old), young adults (19-29), middle-aged adults (30-49), and older adults (50-74), with balanced representation of female and male voices in discussions. In Qala-e-Naw, Maymana, Chagcharan, and Herat, Children's Nutrition Dialogues provided young participants an opportunity to share their perspectives on dietary habits, food availability, and nutritional challenges. Meanwhile, broader Nutrition Dialogues in these provinces convened stakeholders from diverse age groups to discuss food security, healthcare access, and strategies for improving nutrition at the provincial level. These dialogues fostered multi-stakeholder engagement, bringing together youth, community members, and nutrition experts to collaborate on strengthening food systems, improving nutrition education, and addressing malnutrition across Afghanistan.

A summary of the dialogue sessions is presented below:

Dialogue level	Number of dialogues	Gender	Total number of participants
Provincial	8	114 Female 124 Male	238

The selection of participants sought to ensure diversity in socio-economic, cultural, and geographic contexts, enabling the dialogues to capture a holistic understanding of the factors contributing to malnutrition.

3.2 Risk Factors for Malnutrition (Underlying Causes)

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan highlighted several underlying causes of child malnutrition, deeply rooted in poverty, food insecurity, lack of education, gender inequality, inadequate healthcare services, and environmental challenges. These factors align with UNICEF's conceptual framework, demonstrating the systemic barriers that prevent children and families from accessing proper nutrition.

- ***Food Insecurity and Extreme Poverty***

Poverty was one of the most pressing issues identified across all dialogues. In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Badghis", participants emphasised how families prioritise quantity over quality due to financial constraints. A mother shared: "My husband is disabled and cannot work, so my income is not enough to feed my children."

Similarly, in the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Faryab", a 13-year-old girl described: "We had no flour, not even dry bread. My mother asked my father, but he had no money. Finally, he went out to borrow two pieces of bread."

Participants in the "Nutrition Dialogue in Ghor" also revealed that families often sell nutritious local products like yogurt, milk, eggs, and vegetables to buy processed, low-quality food. This practice demonstrates the disconnection between local food production and access to healthy diets.

- ***Lack of Nutrition Education and Cultural Beliefs***

Several dialogues emphasised that a lack of nutrition education contributes to poor dietary habits and food choices. In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Herat", one participant stated: "The lack of knowledge keeps families trapped in a cycle of poor health."

Additionally, cultural norms often reinforce gender-based disparities in food distribution within households. In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Ghor", a boy explained: "Some families believe it is okay for girls to eat less, which harms their health."

Women and girls are frequently the last to eat and receive smaller portions, further increasing their vulnerability to malnutrition.

- ***Limited Access to Healthcare and Humanitarian Assistance***

A recurring issue across the dialogues was the lack of healthcare services and humanitarian aid, which worsens malnutrition rates. In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Ghor", a young girl stated: "The lack of hospitals, poverty, and food shortages are the reasons for malnutrition."

Similarly, participants in the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Faryab" noted that economic collapse has led to a sharp rise in malnutrition rates among children and pregnant women. Without immediate intervention, these trends will continue to worsen.

- ***Environmental Challenges and Climate Change***

Afghanistan's climate crisis and natural disasters have made food security even more fragile. In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Herat", a participant noted: "When the water runs out and crops fail, we have nothing to eat at home."

These frequent droughts and extreme weather conditions have reduced agricultural productivity, forcing families to rely more on external food assistance and processed foods, further limiting dietary diversity.

- ***Immediate Causes of Malnutrition***

The dialogues identified several immediate factors that contribute to child malnutrition, including poor dietary diversity, school dropout rates, child labour, and the mental health impact of food insecurity.

- ***Poor Dietary Diversity***

Participants in the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Faryab" revealed that most children's diets consist of monotonous foods with limited nutrients. A 12-year-old boy stated: "Before going to school, I often only drink tea or water to fill my stomach."

Similarly, in the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Herat", another child said: "We want to eat meat and fruit, but we can only afford bread and tea."

These nutritional deficiencies hinder child development and increase vulnerability to illness.

- ***Child Labour and School Dropouts***

Due to economic hardships, many children are forced to work instead of attending school. In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Badghis", a 14-year-old boy explained: "One day, I was ready to go to school, but my father asked me to work with him in construction because he couldn't do it alone."

Similarly, in the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Faryab", participants highlighted how child labour is increasing, preventing children from accessing education and better opportunities for the future.

- ***Mental Health and Well-being Impact of Malnutrition***

The psychological toll of hunger was another issue raised in the dialogues. In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Badghis", children described how hunger affects their concentration and academic performance.

In the "Child Nutrition Consultation in Herat", a participant noted: "When a mother is stressed or depressed, her ability to care for her children decreases, leading to poor nutrition."

Chronic food insecurity leads to higher stress and anxiety levels, further exacerbating malnutrition in families.

3.4 Urgent Recommended Actions

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan identified several urgent actions necessary to address the underlying and immediate causes of malnutrition. These actions focus on improving food security, expanding economic opportunities, enhancing nutrition education, strengthening healthcare access, and promoting community resilience.

- ***Expanding Humanitarian Aid and Food Assistance***

Across multiple dialogues, children and caregivers called for an expansion of humanitarian aid to reach all communities in need. In the "Children's Nutrition Dialogue for Badghis", participants urged for increased food distribution, especially for malnourished children.

Similarly, in the "Children's Nutrition Dialogue for Faryab", participants stressed that international organisations should help provide food and winter clothing to vulnerable families. One participant noted: "If food is cheap, everyone will be able to buy enough to eat."

In the "Nutrition Dialogue for Ghor", participants suggested emergency feeding programmes for children in schools as a way to reduce hunger while improving education outcomes.

- ***Job Creation and Economic Empowerment***

Unemployment among household breadwinners was a key concern across dialogues. In the "Children's Nutrition Dialogue for Badghis", participants emphasised that job opportunities for the younger generation and heads of households are essential to improving food security.

Similarly, in Faryab, children proposed vocational training programmes such as tailoring and handicrafts, allowing families to earn an income. One participant shared: "If we are given flour and oil, my mother can cook food for us."

Women's economic empowerment was also a priority. In the "Children's Nutrition Dialogue for Ghor", a girl stressed: "Many women have lost jobs. Projects targeting women can uplift their spirits and contribute to the economy."

Additionally, in Faryab, a participant emphasised the importance of local markets for women: "We need more local markets where women can sell their handcrafted products. This way, we can earn money and support our families."

- ***Enhancing Nutrition Education and Awareness***

Education was a recurring theme in the dialogues, with participants calling for community-based training on nutrition and food preparation. In Herat, participants stressed the need for practical sessions for mothers on how to prepare nutritious meals on a budget. One participant explained: "We need workshops to educate mothers on what is essential for their children."

Similarly, in Ghor, a participant suggested: "If institutions organise awareness programmes in schools, they can educate children about nutrition."

Children in Badghis also recommended that nutrition education materials be distributed in schools and communities, ensuring that both children and parents understand the importance of a balanced diet.

- ***Improving Healthcare Access and Infrastructure***

A lack of healthcare services was cited as a major barrier to nutrition improvement. In the "Children's Nutrition Dialogue for Ghor", a boy suggested: "Establishing health centres in remote areas can improve access to healthcare."

Similarly, in Herat, participants called for mobile clinics to provide healthcare services in remote areas. One community leader stated: "Having healthcare professionals come to our villages would change lives."

Additionally, participants in Badghis emphasised the importance of screening and treatment programmes for malnourished mothers and children, calling for expanded nutrition programmes in clinics.

- ***Strengthening Local Food Production and Agricultural Development***

Several dialogues highlighted the need to increase local food production to enhance food security. In Ghor, participants advocated for community gardening and local food promotion, with one girl stating: "Encouraging home gardening can enhance food security."

Similarly, in Faryab, participants suggested investing in livestock and agricultural projects to improve self-sufficiency. One participant explained: "If we can farm again, we will be able to provide for ourselves."

A participant from Ghor also highlighted the importance of using local products: "In our villages, we have milk, yogurt, oil, honey, and vegetables that we can use for nutrition."

- ***Challenging Cultural Norms and Promoting Gender Equity in Nutrition***

Cultural beliefs restricting women's and girls' access to food were widely discussed. In Ghor, one participant stressed: "We should challenge beliefs that restrict women and girls from eating properly."

Participants emphasised that nutrition education must also address harmful social norms to ensure that all family members receive adequate food.

- ***Community-Based Solutions and Social Support Programmes***

Participants highlighted the importance of community-driven solutions to combat food insecurity. In Herat, one participant suggested: "We should encourage exchanges among neighbours, where we can trade excess produce from our gardens."

Similarly, in Badghis, participants recommended long-term development programmes that include vocational training, job creation, and emergency humanitarian assistance.

In Faryab, participants suggested cash assistance programmes for the most vulnerable households, allowing families to purchase essential food supplies.

4. Policy implications and recommendations

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan highlighted the systemic, economic, cultural, and environmental barriers contributing to malnutrition in children and families. Addressing these challenges requires evidence-based, multi-sectoral policies that focus on food security, economic empowerment, healthcare access, nutrition education, and gender equality. The following recommendations align with the UNICEF conceptual framework on malnutrition, ensuring a comprehensive approach to reducing food insecurity and improving child nutrition in Afghanistan.

4.1 Strengthening Food Security and Emergency Response

Widespread food insecurity, exacerbated by economic collapse, conflict, and climate change, has left millions of families without access to sufficient and nutritious food. Participants across dialogues called for expanded food assistance and long-term agricultural solutions.

Policy Recommendations:

- Expand national and international food aid programmes, prioritising communities in high-risk regions to ensure access to essential nutrition.
- Integrate school feeding programmes into national education policies, ensuring that children receive at least one nutritious meal daily.
- Promote climate-resilient agricultural policies that support drought-resistant crops and water conservation techniques to increase food production.
- Strengthen food distribution infrastructure to ensure equitable access to essential food supplies in remote and underserved areas.
- Develop social protection programmes, such as cash transfers and food vouchers, to support vulnerable households in meeting their nutritional needs.

4.2 Enhancing Economic Empowerment and Job Creation

Unemployment and the collapse of income-generating opportunities have significantly contributed to malnutrition. Households are unable to afford nutritious food, and children are forced into labour instead of attending school.

Policy Recommendations:

- Invest in vocational training programmes, particularly for women and youth, to create sustainable employment opportunities.
- Support small-scale entrepreneurship and income-generating projects, such as handicrafts and local markets, to increase household income.
- Establish community-based savings and loan programmes to empower families with financial resources to purchase nutritious food.
- Promote gender-inclusive economic policies that ensure women's full participation in the workforce, improving household food security.

4.3 Expanding Access to Healthcare and Nutrition Services

A lack of accessible and affordable healthcare services was a major concern raised in the dialogues. Malnourished children and mothers often lack medical care, exacerbating the long-term effects of malnutrition.

Policy Recommendations:

- Strengthen community health worker programmes to improve access to maternal and child nutrition services.
- Expand mobile health clinics in remote areas, ensuring timely diagnosis and treatment of malnutrition.
- Develop national nutrition monitoring systems to track malnutrition rates and target interventions where they are needed most.
- Ensure universal access to maternal and child nutrition services, including vitamin supplementation, breastfeeding support, and growth monitoring programmes.
- Integrate nutrition services into primary healthcare by training health workers on identifying and treating malnutrition effectively.

4.4 Strengthening Nutrition Education and Awareness

A lack of knowledge about healthy eating habits and food preparation was consistently cited as a barrier to improved nutrition. Participants emphasised the need for community-wide education programmes that promote dietary diversity and food security.

Policy Recommendations:

- Include nutrition education in school curricula, teaching children about healthy eating, food diversity, and hygiene practices.
- Launch nationwide awareness campaigns to educate families on affordable, nutritious meal preparation using locally available foods.
- Train community leaders, teachers, and healthcare providers to deliver culturally appropriate nutrition education.
- Develop targeted nutrition programmes for pregnant and lactating mothers, ensuring they receive adequate dietary guidance.

4.5 Addressing Gender Inequality in Nutrition Access

Gender-based discrimination in food distribution within households disproportionately affects women and girls, limiting their access to essential nutrients. Participants stressed the urgent need to challenge harmful cultural norms that restrict nutrition for women.

Policy Recommendations:

- Develop gender-sensitive nutrition policies that promote equitable food distribution within households.
- Ensure that women have equal access to food, healthcare, and income-generating opportunities to improve their nutritional status.
- Incorporate gender equality education into community nutrition programmes, highlighting the importance of balanced diets for all family members.
- Strengthen legal protections for women and girls, ensuring their right to food security and healthcare.

4.6 Climate Adaptation Strategies for Food Security

Droughts, floods, and erratic weather patterns are significantly reducing food production, worsening malnutrition in rural communities. Building resilience against climate shocks is essential for long-term food security.

Policy Recommendations:

- Develop national climate resilience strategies to protect food production from environmental shocks.
- Promote water conservation and irrigation programmes to support sustainable agriculture.
- Support local food production through investment in climate-resilient crops and sustainable farming techniques.
- Integrate climate adaptation measures into food security policies, ensuring long-term agricultural sustainability.

4.7 Strengthening Multi-Sectoral Coordination and Governance

Effective nutrition policies require strong coordination between government agencies, NGOs, and local communities. A lack of structured oversight limits the impact of nutrition interventions.

Policy Recommendations:

- Establish a multi-sectoral nutrition task force, ensuring collaboration across health, education, and agriculture sectors.
- Develop a national action plan for nutrition, with measurable goals and accountability mechanisms.
- Increase funding for nutrition programmes, ensuring financial sustainability of interventions.

- Mandate regular monitoring and evaluation of nutrition policies, ensuring evidence-based decision-making.

5. Conclusion

The Nutrition Dialogues in Afghanistan shed light on the severe and complex challenges contributing to malnutrition among children and vulnerable communities. Food insecurity, extreme poverty, lack of nutrition education, gender inequality, inadequate healthcare services, and climate-related shocks emerged as the primary barriers preventing families from accessing a diverse and nutritious diet.

Despite these challenges, the dialogues also revealed a strong desire for community-driven solutions. Participants emphasised the need for expanded food assistance, economic empowerment programmes, nutrition education, improved healthcare services, and agricultural development to ensure sustainable food security. The voices of children, caregivers, and community members highlighted that tackling malnutrition requires a multi-sectoral approach, where interventions are locally driven, culturally appropriate, and backed by strong policy commitments.

Moving forward, urgent and coordinated action is necessary to transform these recommendations into tangible outcomes. Government institutions, humanitarian organisations, and community stakeholders must collaborate to implement sustainable policies and programmes that address both the immediate and underlying causes of malnutrition. The insights gathered from these dialogues serve as a powerful call to action—ensuring that every child in Afghanistan has access to the nutrition they need to grow, learn, and thrive. By acting decisively and inclusively, Afghanistan can break the cycle of malnutrition and build a healthier, more resilient future for its children and communities.

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