

ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY | The number of people facing high acute food insecurity decreased substantially as the financial crisis stabilized and food prices fell, but worrying food access issues remained.

PEAK 2023 (AUGUST–OCTOBER)

 **5.5M** people, 24% of the total country population were estimated to face high levels of acute food insecurity.

This is an improvement since 2022 – when 6.3 million people or 28 percent of the population faced high levels of acute food insecurity as assessed by CARI methodology. It reflects the improving economy and better affordability of nutrient-rich food groups. Pockets of acute food insecurity were still very concerning, particularly among chronically vulnerable populations (those living in the Estate sector or dependent on the informal sector for income).




Source: WFP CARI, December 2023.

A periodic food crisis A lower-middle-income country, Sri Lanka has been selected as a food crisis for each GRFC but only reported data in 2017 resulting from drought assessments, and has been defined as a major food crisis since 2022, when the country experienced its worst economic crisis since independence in 1948.

Critically low foreign exchange reserves, the socioeconomic effects of COVID – including a drop in tourism – and the effects of the war in Ukraine on fuel and other commodity prices prompted the government to declare sovereign default in May 2022. Together with a sharp national currency depreciation these factors limited import capacity, causing acute shortages and further price spikes for essential products, including fuel, medicines, food and inputs, bringing economic activities to a halt and pushing food inflation to an all-time high of 95 percent (FAO/WFP, September 2022).

DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS 2023–2024

 **Economic shocks** The gradual increase in foreign exchange reserves, disbursement of donor funds and modest currency appreciation strengthened the financial capacity of the country to import food (FAO/WFP, May 2023).

With donor support, chemical fertilizers were imported, and domestic food availability improved compared with the severely reduced level in 2021/22 (FAO/WFP, May 2023).


Food prices started to decline from August 2022 following the harvest and significant imports of rice. Food inflation decreased through 2023 from 60 percent in January to below zero in July and -5.2 percent by the end of October, before increasing slightly to 1.6 percent in December (WFP, December 2023; WB, March 2024). Nevertheless, high prices of fuel, fertilizers, agrochemicals, seeds, labour and mechanized operations hampered Mala crop production of maize and rice during the first half of the year (FAO-GIEWS, June 2023).

Government-subsidized fertilizer supported increased rice paddy production during the Yala season, which elevated 2023 yields at the end of the year (Ministry of Agriculture and Plantation Industries, February 2024). Livestock production was expected to decline compared with the already reduced level in 2022 because of limited availability and high costs of feed concentrates. High fuel, labour, equipment and ice costs severely curtailed income from

fishing for communities reliant on it (FAO/WFP, May 2023).

Lack of income curtailed food access, especially for wage labourers. According to the March 2023 food security survey, about 62 percent of households reported that their total monthly income had reduced compared with the previous year.

Farmgate prices of crops did not rise proportionally with the sharply increased crop production costs. For resource-poor smallholder farmers with between 0.25 and 2 hectares of land – who constitute over 50 percent of paddy farmers – production costs often exceeded their returns (FAO/WFP, May 2023).


 **Weather extremes** With the intensification of the southwest monsoon, Sri Lanka experienced heavy rainfall in the Western, Sabaragamuwa, and Southern provinces in October 2023. Floods and landslides displaced populations in the Gampaha, Matara, and Galle districts and affected more than 75 000 people in 13 districts.


The heavy rains, high winds and floods damaged agricultural lands and standing crops in low-lying areas with more than 7 500 farmers losing their crops, wage labour was also affected, particularly in the Matara district (IFRC, November 2023).


ACUTE MALNUTRITION

 The impacts of the country's political and economic crisis likely drove a deterioration in the nutrition situation. The National Nutrition and Micronutrient Survey 2022 indicated 'very high' acute malnutrition among children aged 6–59 months at 19.8 percent up from 13.2 percent in 2021. The prevalence of severe acute malnutrition also increased from 1.7 percent to 2.5 percent (Department of Nutrition Medical Research Institute, March 2023).

DRIVERS OF ACUTE MALNUTRITION 2023–2024

 **Inadequate services** The inability to import medicines due to depleted foreign reserves caused shortages that severely impacted healthcare supplies. While about 84 percent of households had access to safe drinking water nationally, about 66.8 percent of households in the estate sector did not (OCHA, October 2022).

 **Inadequate practices** Dietary diversity was inadequate, resulting in suboptimal intake of micronutrient-rich foods.

 **Lack of food** Amid the hike in prices for nutritious food and nationwide food rationing in 2022, nutritional assistance was temporarily reduced, including the delivery of Thripasha, a nutrition supplement targeting acutely malnourished children and pregnant and breastfeeding women. This left many children untreated and many PBW at risk of malnutrition. Schools still serving meals significantly cut portion sizes and protein density.

Despite clear improvements in food security since 2022 food consumption of some key food groups remained limited during the lean season: protein-rich food groups were consumed an average three days a week each (WFP, December 2023).