

MERCY CORPS  
FOOD SECURITY  
SECTOR OVERVIEW  
2009



*Photo: Jenny Vaughan/Mercy Corps*

## FINDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FOOD SECURITY

Mercy Corps helps people in the world's toughest places turn the crises of natural disaster, poverty and conflict into opportunities for progress. Driven by local needs and market conditions, our programs provide communities with the tools and support they need to transform their own lives. Our worldwide team of 3,700 professionals is improving the lives of 14.5 million people in more than 40 countries. In recognition that access to adequate food and nutritional sustenance is integral to the success of relief and development programming, Mercy Corps currently operates upwards of 40 food security development projects in over 20 countries, worth approximately \$200 million. These projects work with **communities and households to develop and implement sustainable approaches to meeting their own food needs and improve food availability, access and utilization, as well as the ability to withstand shocks.**

It is estimated that more than 1 billion people live in hunger.<sup>1</sup> That means one person in every seven is at risk from one of the most deadly and widespread health issues in the world today, malnutrition. UNICEF estimates 60 percent of child deaths in developing countries are from malnutrition, and those that survive hunger in the early stages of life are at risk from irreparable physical and mental health issues. While this level of health and hunger is severe, the food security sector offers an effective leverage point to alleviate this suffering: The UN claims there is enough food on the planet to provide the global population with a healthy and nutritious diet. Agriculture plays a crucial role in developing countries where the 450 million small farms – two hectares or less – are home to about 2 billion people, comprising roughly 46 percent of the global workforce.<sup>2</sup> Improvements in health care, water and sanitation conditions and hygienic household practices can allow children to grow up well nourished and families to maintain good health and nutrition status. Mercy Corps believes that the human capital exists to eradicate chronic hunger and malnutrition. Our food security programs attempt to catalyze this potential in order to find viable long-term solutions to the availability, access and utilization of food resources.

The design and implementation of our food security programming is proving to be effective for the complex, transitional environments in which we work. Our field reports show there is clear synergy with our agricultural, economic development and health sectors, as well as the Mercy Corps Action Center to End World Hunger and our environmental and conflict management programming.

<sup>1</sup> UN WFP, <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>

<sup>2</sup> World Bank Development Database.



Photo: Thatcher Cook for Mercy Corps

## WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?

### Defining Food Security

Food security has been defined as “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”<sup>3</sup> Four interrelated variables are central to achieving food security:

1. **Food Availability** – when sufficient quantity is consistently available to all individuals through household production, domestic output, commercial imports or food assistance.
2. **Food Access** – when households and all individuals have adequate resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Access depends on income available to the household, distribution of food among members of the household and the price of food.
3. **Food Utilization** – the proper use of food requires a diet with sufficient energy and essential nutrients, potable water and adequate sanitation. Effective utilization depends on good health and knowledge within households of basic principals of nutrition and proper childcare.
4. **Risk Management** – the degree to which individuals, households or communities can cope with and withstand stressful situations and shocks. Vulnerability can be grouped into five categories by risk factors: environmental, market, political, social and health. Inability to manage risks can lead to food insecurity.

### Food Secure Households

A food secure household is one that can produce, or access, sufficient amounts of nutritious food for all family members, one that enjoys good health and sanitation facilities and practices, and one that is resilient to shocks that might make the household vulnerable again. In other words, a food secure household has met its essential health, economic and productive needs. While the household might still be poor, its members are not challenged by day-to-day threats to its survival caused by lack of food, and can work towards longer-term development priorities.

<sup>3</sup> USAID key concepts, adopted at World Food Summit of 1996, reconfirmed at World Food Summit of 2002.

## MERCY CORPS' FOOD SECURITY APPROACH

### Food Security Sector Mission

Through its food security programming, Mercy Corps aims to empower households and communities to develop and implement sustainable approaches to meeting their own food needs and improve food availability, access and utilization, as well as the ability to withstand shocks.

### Food Availability

The first necessary condition for food security is straightforward: food must be available to be consumed. Mercy Corps approaches issues of availability through several means, including **building agricultural production, improving access to markets and providing food distribution**. Mercy Corps has worked with small farmers to increase agricultural production, through providing inputs or capacity building, in order to increase household consumption as well as a source of income. Mercy Corps' emergency and developmental relief programs have worked in situations in which there has been a food deficit and food distribution has been urgently needed to provide vulnerable people with sufficient caloric intake.

### Food Access

While food may be available, there is no guarantee that all household members will be able to access it. Lack of purchasing power keeps many families from obtaining the food necessary for a healthy and productive life. Mercy Corps works at a grassroots level to help households sustainably build their income. While we work on **economic development** on many levels, food security programming focuses on the most vulnerable.

### Food Utilization

Being able to produce or purchase food is not sufficient to ensure a healthy life: food needs to be selected and prepared appropriately, with adequate health care, child care and water and sanitation conditions in place. Mercy Corps addresses underlying causes of food insecurity through programs that address **maternal and child health issues, community nutrition, safe water provision, hygiene and sanitation practices and HIV/AIDS education**, prevention and rehabilitation. This permits the body to effectively **utilize** the food it consumes.

### Risk Management – Establishing Resiliency

If the components of availability, access and utilization cannot be sustained, then households cannot realistically be considered as food secure. Mercy Corps' programs work towards **long-term solutions** to food insecurity through a variety of approaches. At the time that food security programs are designed, Mercy Corps seeks to identify the longer-term causes of insecurity, be they social, political, environmental, health or market related. Program activities directly address those threats, and promote systems and structures that will enable food security sustainability. Such systems can also provide platforms for ongoing community development.

#### GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS

Mercy Corps  
45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, OR 97204  
800.292.3355  
[www.mercycorps.org](http://www.mercycorps.org)

© 2009 Mercy Corps. All rights reserved.

You must be the change  
you wish to see in the world.

~ Gandhi



Be the change