Photo: Niger - S. Sheridan

OUR FOOD SECURITY APPROACH

Resilient Solutions to Root Causes

MERCY CORPS

Introduction

Despite recent progress in reducing global hunger, 795 million people remain undernourished, at least 528 million of which live in countries where Mercy Corps is present.[1,2] Food insecurity and attendant malnutrition cause poor physical and cognitive development, increase vulnerability to disease, limit productivity over a lifetime, and impede economic development.[3] By increasing the resilience of food security to progressively complex influences (e.g., conflict, climate change, price volatility), we strengthen the foundation of well-being upon which vulnerable populations can build secure, productive and just communities.

The Sustainable Development Goals challenge countries, by 2030, to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition, promote sustainable agriculture, and achieve food security among other ambitious objectives. The 72 developing countries that have achieved the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving hunger within their borders have done so in large part by sustaining economic growth, particularly driven by pro-poor development of the agriculture sector, while providing reliable government-supported services and safety nets.[4] This approach should be scaled up in places experiencing inclusive economic growth alongside strong government commitments to reducing hunger and improving nutrition.

What is Food Security?

Building on language developed at the World Food Summit (1996), Mercy Corps defines food security as a development outcome achieved when all people at all times consume sufficient, safe, and nutritious food and practice behaviors that promote both their sustainable economic productivity and well-being. There are four equally critical dimensions of food security:

> The physical availability of food;

> Economic and physical access to food;

> The ability of the body to make use of food, supported by sufficient, diverse diets and good food preparation, feeding and hygiene practices; and

> The stability of these dimensions over time.

We focus on holistic impact, going beyond improving access to food. We work to translate increased incomes to improved diets, ensure individual behaviors promote good health, and promote peaceful, well-governed communities that provide an environment conducive to positive change.

However, in the places Mercy Corps works, these conditions are often absent. Where we encounter food insecurity, communities are not resilient to the myriad constraints, shocks and stresses that undercut their well-being. To successfully increase food security in these contexts, Mercy Corps has developed a distinctive approach—incorporating best practices and resilience thinking—that is applicable in a range of contexts and addresses the root causes of these challenges.

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[1] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), & World Food Programme (WFP). (2015). The state of food insecurity in the world 2015. Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets: taking stock of uneven progress. Rome: FAO. Note: A conservative estimate, not taking into account the numbers of food insecure who live in areas for which no accurate data exists but where food insecurity is rampant.

[2] The complex nature of food security means there is no single indicator we use to measure it. Throughout this document, nutrition-related indicators are used as proxies since food insecurity is a key underlying cause of malnutrition, but it is acknowledged that there are other causes of malnutrition.

[3] Maternal and Child Nutrition Study Group. (2013). Maternal and child nutrition: building momentum for impact. The Lancet 2013;382(9890):372–375. Retrieved from http://www.download.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/piis0140-6736(13)60988-5/fulltext

[4] FAO, IFAD, & WFP. (2015). *The state of food insecurity in the world 2015. Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets: taking stock of uneven progress.* Rome: FAO.

The Toughest Challenges in Food Security

In contexts characterized by inclusive economic growth and active government commitments to citizen well-being, large-scale improvements in food security can occur. When these conditions are not present, progress toward food security is made difficult by a number of underlying challenges, often the same factors that undermine development. While barriers to food security will always be context specific, broadly speaking, the following categories of challenges are common drivers of food insecurity.

Photo: Kyrgyzstan - T. Harris

COMPLEX CRISES

About 20 percent of food insecurity today lurks amid the complex crises that have come to define most humanitarian situations in recent years.[5,6] In these places, conflict becomes a major driver of extreme poverty and suffering. Food security suffers when people are unable to access their land or markets either because conflict makes such movements impossible to undertake safely or because fleeing separates them entirely from their livelihoods and normal sources of food. The interruption of both public and private-based services—such as health care, agricultural input availability, education and water—further erodes food security amidst conflict. The current scale of hunger amid complex crisis is a recent phenomenon; according to the United Nations, only a third of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa experiencing a food crisis in 1990 were also in the midst of a protracted conflict. By 2010, this figure had grown to 80 percent.[7] In countries facing complex crises, the prevalence of undernutrition is 39 percent versus 15 percent among all developing countries.[8]

FAILURE OF GOVERNANCE

In places that have made the greatest progress toward improving food security, government commitment and investment have often played a central role. Governance failures not only lie at the heart of complex crises (see related), they can stall or undermine food security improvement efforts, even when crises do not degenerate into instability and conflict. This is evident when comparing the role of governance in Latin America, which as a region met the first MDG target, and sub-Saharan Africa, which fell short.[9] In Latin America, government spending directed toward high profile, nationwide anti-hunger and malnutrition initiatives increased by six percent across the region between 1990 and 2012. During this time period, rates of undernutrition plummeted.[10] In contrast, during the same period few governments in sub-Saharan Africa committed to well-funded initiatives around ending hunger, and progress has been more limited. Those countries that did increase investment in such initiatives—such as Ethiopia, Rwanda and South Africa—outperformed their regional peers in reducing hunger.[11]

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[5] For Mercy Corps, a Complex Crisis is a situation with complex social, political and economic origins, which involves the breakdown of state structures, the disputed legitimacy of host authorities, the abuse of human rights and possibly armed conflict. The term is generally used to differentiate humanitarian needs arising from conflict and instability from those that arise from natural disasters.

[6] FAO, IFAD, & WFP. (2015). The state of food insecurity in the world 2015. Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets: taking stock of uneven progress (pp. 37). Rome: FAO.

[7] Ibid., p. 38.

[8] Ibid., p. 37.

[9] Ibid., p. 11.

[10] Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean of the Food and Agriculture Organization. (2015). Regional overview of food insecurity: Latin America and Caribbean: The region has reached the international hunger targets (pp. 16). FAO.

[11] Food and Agriculture Organization Regional Office for Africa. (2015). Regional overview of food insecurity: African food insecurity prospects brighter than ever (pp. 8-10). FAO.

BEHAVIORS THAT UNDERMINE OPTIMAL PRODUCTIVITY AND WELL-BEING

At the local level, individual, household and community behaviors are key to achieving and maintaining food security.[12] However, people are often uninformed or unable to act in their best interests, which can directly undermine nutritional status, livelihood, productivity, and other factors that contribute to food security. For example, researchers estimate that regular hand washing with soap at critical times could prevent a third of diarrheal episodes that inhibit affected people from absorbing the nutritional content of the food they eat.[13] And in many places, households demonstrate their wealth by keeping livestock herds at unsustainable sizes instead of using them as a productive asset and downsizing during times of stress. Optimal behaviors can boost productivity, increasing availability of and access to food and improving food utilization. New or improved behaviors are also critical to developing absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities, which help maintain food security in the face of shocks and stresses.

DISEMPOWERMENT

A person's gender, age, or social, ethnic or religious identity can impact their ability to access and consume a quality diet. Globally, women and girls face increased food insecurity due to local or household norms or government policies that limit their access to education and employment; restrict their food intake within households; constrain their decision-making about their own behaviors, ability to seek health care services, and use of household resources; and prevent them from accessing productive resources and assets.[14] The increased nutritional requirements and large labor burdens that many women and girls bear as well as

Photo: Niger - S. Sheridan

A person's gender, age, or social, ethnic or religious identity can impact their ability to access and consume a quality diet.

exposure to increased domestic violence in times of food scarcity magnify the ill effect on their well-being. Social and ethnic identity can also have a disempowering effect. For example, disadvantaged groups in Nepal's caste system experience pervasive discrimination, resulting in limited access to farmland, communal water sources, and other resources, leading to higher rates of poverty and childhood stunting than national averages.[15] Developing programming aimed at empowering disadvantaged groups is a critical aspect of improving food security, even in crises.

[12] Food Security and Nutrition Network Social and Behavioral Change Task Force. (2013). Designing for Behavior Change For Agriculture, Natural Resource Management, Health and Nutrition. Washington, DC: Technical and Operational Performance Support (TOPS) Program. Note: While development actors often assume that the main reasons individuals do not engage in optimal behaviors to support their well-being are lack of knowledge or lack of resources, there are in fact 12 recognized, universal determinants of behavior that influence behaviors cross-culturally. While these include skills and resources, these also include self-efficacy, social norms, policy, culture, and perceptions around positive and negative consequences, risk, severity, efficacy and divine will. Effective behavior change means ensuring that none of these determinants are creating a barrier to individuals taking on an improved behavior.

[13] Ejemot, R.I., Ehiri J.E., Meremikwu M.M., & Critchley J.A. (2008). Hand washing for preventing diarrhea. International Journal of Epidemiology,23(1).

[14] The United Nations estimates that addressing the gender gap in access to production resources could raise agricultural output in developing countries 2.5-4 percent and reduce the prevalence of undernourishment by 12-17 percent. FAO, WFP, and IFAD. (2012.) The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012. Economic growth is necessary but not sufficient to accelerate reduction of hunger and malnutrition. Rome: FAO.

[15] Bennett, L., Ram Dahal, D., & Govindasamy, P. (2008). Caste, ethnic and regional identity in Nepal: Further Analysis of the 2006 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey. Calverton, MD: Macro International Inc.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change affects food security in two main ways. First, the increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, like droughts and floods, destroy the crops, livestock, natural resources, and infrastructure that people rely on for their livelihoods, forcing wide scale reliance on coping mechanisms (e.g., going into debt, removing children from school, increasing labor burdens) that jeopardize long-term food security. Second, increasing climate variability, such as changing rainfall patterns and average temperatures, undermines agricultural production and enables debilitating diseases to spread into new areas. The UN's World Food Program estimates that, by 2050, climate change will increase the risk of food insecurity by 10-20 percent.[16] Developing countries, lower-income communities, and lower-latitude areas will be disproportionately at risk.[17]

LOCAL FOOD AVAILABILITY

The common assertion that there is enough food produced currently to feed everyone on the planet often leads to the conclusion that ending food insecurity is largely an issue of improving access to that food. While this statement is technically true, the dynamics of the global food system are far removed from the world's most food insecure populations. Boosting the local availability of sufficient, healthy foods therefore remains a critical aim of food security work. This will become even more important in the coming years as population growth outstrips the current production capacity of the global agricultural sector. In the last twenty years, investment in agricultural growth has waned, even as natural resource degradation—especially in soil and water—and climate variability has increased, hindering agricultural production using current methods and inputs. The relatively low supply in relation to population growth is widely expected to push food prices up by as much as 20 percent over the next ten years and increase the volatility of food prices, a prospect that will further challenge food security gains.[18]

URBANIZATION

In 2008, the world's urban population surpassed the rural population for the first time, a milestone in shifting demographics that has major implications for how we address food insecurity now and in the future. Largely unable to produce their own food, urban residents rely heavily on food purchases, making them especially vulnerable to food price increases and volatility. Those living in urban slums and informal settlements—about a third of the global population according to the FAO—face even greater challenges to their food security.[19] Informal settlements often lack cooking facilities, forcing residents to abandon nutritious foods from their rural diets to consume ready-to-eat meals or heavily processed foods made with low quality ingredients. The growth of informal settlements also impacts the health of residents. Confined living space combined with a lack of quality water resources and sanitation facilities translates into high rates of diarrheal and other diseases undermining the food utilization of urban residents.

Photo: Ethiopia - J. Kabana

Photo: Guatemala - C. Robbins

[16] Krishna Krishnamurthy, P., Lewis, K., & Choularton, R.J. (2012). Climate impacts on food security and nutrition: A review of existing knowledge (pp. 3-5). Met Office and WFP Office for Climate Change, Environment, and Disaster Risk Reduction.

[17] Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. (2014). Fifth assessment report summary for policy makers. Climate change 2014: impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability (pp.12). IPCC.

[18] Barrett, C. (2014). Presentation to Weill Cornell Global Health Grand Rounds: The global food security challenge of the coming decades. New York, NY.

[19] FAO. Food for the Cities. ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/012/ak824e/ak824e00.pdf, accessed December 9, 2015.

Our Approach

Mercy Corps sees food security as an outcome of programs that integrate all of the sectors in which we work. As illustrated in Figure 1, we pursue food security as a crosscutting goal, dependent on healthy ecological systems, good governance, social empowerment, sound health, pro-poor market systems, and peace and stability. Food security emerges where these areas converge: when conditions allow people to consider their long-term interests in addition to their immediate needs when making choices about behaviors affecting their productivity and well-being. For example, pro-poor market systems can supply nutritious foods at affordable prices, but an additional focus on gender and empowerment can ensure women are able to buy them. Similarly, effective governance of ecological systems can ensure the natural resource base promotes sustainable and reliable agricultural production. Significant progress toward food security is only possible when systems and local capacities interact in an optimal way to overcome myriad disrupting influences.[20]

Figure 1. Food security emerges where these five areas converge.

The following characteristics distinguish Mercy Corps' approach to food security.

FOOD SECURITY IS A DEVELOPMENT OUTCOME, NOT A SECTOR

Food security is a desired outcome of our work to build resilient systems in support of healthy and growing communities. It hinges on the resilience of systems (i.e., social, economic and ecological) across scales (i.e., national, local, community, household and individual) to shocks and stresses that undermine well-being. Food insecurity—both chronic and acute—is the result of systemic constraints on behavior compounded by shocks and stresses. When existing absorptive capacities fail, the coping strategies that vulnerable populations employ usually further undermine their food security. Our resilience approach deepens our understanding of three key elements of food security—access to, availability of, and proper utilization of food—and helps us consider how to improve food security and make it stable over time.

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[20] Coleman-Jensen, A., Gregory, C. & Singh, A. (2014). Household Food Security in the United States in 2013. Economic Research Service, United States Department of Agriculture.

ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY THROUGH MULTI-SECTORAL PROGRAMMING

Because food insecurity is a complex problem resulting from multiple failures within the social, economic and ecological systems upon which people rely, Mercy Corps works closely with communities to understand its root causes. Our approach considers age-old contributors to food insecurity—longstanding generational stresses on vulnerable populations such as lack of infrastructure, low agricultural yields, or poor health status—alongside complicating and compounding shocks and stresses, such as increased climate variability, poor governance, or social marginalization. By identifying the set of factors interacting to undermine food security in a given context, Mercy Corps can work with communities to replace negative reinforcement loops, which create poverty traps and on-going vulnerability, with positive feedback loops that promote prosperity and well-being.

This systems thinking approach allows Mercy Corps, in partnership with communities, to develop multi-sectoral programs that aim to build the capacity of people to act productively within social, economic and ecological systems to ensure their own food security. Ultimately, our food security work reflects approaches from all the sectors in which we work—from conflict mitigation, economic and market development, and governance to agriculture, public health, nutrition, water, sanitation, and hygiene—as well as the mainstreaming lenses essential to any good programming, such as resilience, gender, youth, social inclusion, and ecological sustainability (the final section explores these themes in more depth). The comprehensiveness of this approach ensures we do no harm as we address the true causes of food insecurity.

Our Core Principles

> **Resilience Thinking**: Our focus on resilience builds individual, household and community capacity to adapt to and learn from shocks and stresses related to food insecurity

> **Multi-sectoral and Systems Thinking**: We use systems-thinking to tackle food insecurity at its root, developing complex, multi-sector programming that can work to address multiple causes of vulnerability simultaneously

> **Emphasis on Individual Well-being**: While working toward system and behavior change, the ultimate outcome is increased well-being for the people we serve

> **Long-term**: Because building capacity and changing systems takes time, we invest in long-term food security strategies that likely incorporate many programs

> **Transferable**: We strive to ensure our approach is applicable in different contexts, from development situations to humanitarian emergencies

FRAMING FOOD SECURITY AS A LONG-TERM STRATEGY

Food security is the outcome of a long-term strategy—one involving many innovative multi-sector projects, often over many years—aimed at building capacity and ownership among individuals and communities and facilitating change in the systems upon which they rely. Sustained change requires meaningful local engagement and action, a process which necessitates Mercy Corps' long-term involvement as a facilitator. Maintaining progress toward our long-term goal of improving food security through small programs requires Mercy Corps teams to design context-specific strategies that have clear and measurable intermediate results that can guide individual program design and targets. A portfolio of shorter programs, over time and across sectors, will contribute to progress toward the ultimate goal of food security.[21] As we implement programs with shorter time frames, we may need to sacrifice large short-term impacts during the implementation period so that we can better lay the groundwork for

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[21] For more, see Nicholson, D. (2015). Resilience Discussion Paper No. 1: Resilience Strategies, not Resilience Projects. Mercy Corps.

larger and sustained impacts only achievable over time. For example, lasting improvements in livestock quality in a vulnerable, pastoralist community may be best achieved through market-oriented interventions—such as increasing the presence and quality of animal health care and breeding services—even if faster results could be achieved by directly distributing improved animals.

ADDRESSING BOTH ACUTE AND CHRONIC HUNGER TO ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY

Mercy Corps' work in complex crises and transitional environments targets the intersection of chronic and acute hunger: where long-standing vulnerability is exacerbated by immediate shocks. From the Global Food Crisis in 2008, to recurrent drought in the Horn and Sahel, to conflict-related hunger in the Middle East, Mercy Corps has been honing mechanisms to meet both immediate needs and help communities transform when faced with crisis. Though we continue to integrate conflict, governance and resilience goals into our programming to address the root causes of humanitarian situations, food assistance programs (including using cash or voucher transfers) and efforts to strengthen and increase connectivity to local safety net mechanisms remain essential to helping individuals, households and communities recover from short-term shocks.[22] As situations stabilize, Mercy Corps phases out safety nets progressively and refocuses efforts on long-term capacity building and systems change.

Our Theory of Change

Mercy Corps works with communities, local organizations and authorities to identify the root causes of food insecurity and uses this knowledge to develop comprehensive and inclusive multi-sector programming aimed achieving resilient food security. As illustrated in Figure 2, our theory of change presents the conditions under which resilient food security is attainable for communities and individuals:

IF social, ecological and economic systems are more resilient and equitable, AND communities and individuals undertake behaviors that support their productivity and health, AND communities are better governed and more peaceful, THEN communities will be able to improve stable food availability, access and utilization, AND the individuals within them will be more food secure.

IF
- Social, ecological and economic systems are more resilient and equitable.
- Communities and individuals undertake behaviors that support their productivity and health
- Communities are better governed and more peaceful

THEN → Communities will be more able to ensure stable food availability, access and utilization.

AND The individuals within them will be more food secure.

Figure 2. Mercy Corps' Theory of Change for Food Security.

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[22] Wolfe, R. (2015). Addressing the root causes of complex crises: increasing resilience, strengthening governance, creating peaceful change – a companion paper to Responding to complex crises. Mercy Corps.

	Social, ecological and economic systems are more resilient and equitable	Communities and individuals undertake behaviors that support their productivity and health	Communities are better governed and more peaceful
Stable Availability	Resilience-thinking allows us to target the systemic barriers compromising agricultural productivity, food production, and local market importation and distribution.	Optimal agricultural practices used by everyone increase crop and livestock productivity, either for home consumption or to supply local markets. The behavior of traders, processors and other actors influences market efficiency and local market supply.	Inclusive good governance, peace, and stability create an environment where agricultural and market systems are more likely to thrive.
Stable Access	Functional agricultural systems and markets provide income opportunities that can enable households to purchase diverse foods. Equity in the social system ensures that each person in a household and community—no matter their gender, age or other consideration—has access to the food they need.	An individual's behaviors, whether freely chosen or influenced by informal norms or formal rules, affects how much income they earn, ultimately determining how much is available for food purchases. Behaviors also determine whether people use their income to purchase a diverse, high-quality diet.	Good governance and peace provide an enabling environment for individuals to pursue income generating activities. A secure environment also promotes the ability of diverse groups to travel safely to local markets, make food purchases, and access essential services, such as health care and education, that support long-term food security.
Stable Utilization	Income opportunities also support people's ability to access sufficient amounts of diverse foods, as well as the resources needed to maintain food quality during storage and nutrient quality during preparation.	Practices around water treatment and storage, food preparation, and hygiene either support or hinder food utilization. High labor burden among women and girls restricts their ability to take on extra behaviors, such as seeking antenatal care, that support their well-being.	Effective local governance systems support access to and maintenance of community assets—such as water points—and disseminate important health and nutrition information. Many communities rely on formal governance structures to provide services such as quality health care and education, while peace and stability increase individuals' ability to use those services when they need them.

We adapt this theory of change based on the demands of each unique context and target population. This means that in complex crises, our food security work first and foremost meets life-sustaining needs through the provision of food assistance. In these interventions, we work to ensure food rations support absorptive capacity, helping sustain well-being, particularly for young children, women of reproductive age, and the chronically ill.

We also work closely with communities in complex crises to understand the root causes of food insecurity. In these places, food insecurity is often a result of governance failures and conflict, requiring interventions rooted in conflict management and governance-based programming aimed at sustaining agricultural productivity and market functionality; improving community and individual security; and maintaining critical services such as health care, water provision and sanitation.[23] We apply the same strategies in places that have the potential for or have recently experienced complex crisis, while empowering vulnerable populations and establishing inclusive governance structures and processes to catalyze transformational change.

In the stable and post-crisis countries where we work, our food security work couples these components with relationship building among private sector, civil society and government actors. In each stage, we work at the systems level, promote optimal behaviors, and support governance and conflict-sensitive approaches in an effort to ensure communities can secure food availability, access and utilization to the diverse foods they need.

Food Security Across Sectors and Approaches

The root causes of food insecurity are as likely to lie in conflict and poor governance as in poor agricultural performance, poverty or malnutrition. By treating food security as an outcome instead of a sector, Mercy Corps is able to draw on approaches that guide all of the sectors in which we work in addressing food insecurity.

› **Conflict Mitigation**: Food security and conflict are deeply interrelated dynamics. Conflict undermines food security where it destroys crops and livestock, displaces populations, disrupts agricultural and food markets, and interrupts livelihoods. Food insecurity itself can create conflict. In 2007-08, rapid increases in food prices triggered unrest in 43 countries, including a government overthrow in Haiti, as populations reacted to rapidly rising costs for critical food staples.[24,25] Low incomes and decreased agricultural production can also increase competition and conflict over limited resources, such as water and arable land.[26]

› **Health and Nutrition**: Poor health and poor nutrition form a vicious cycle that undermines food security in vulnerable populations, particularly when combined with early marriage and pregnancy. Malnutrition contributes to 45 percent of all child deaths and results in 2-3 percent decreases in gross domestic product in affected countries.[27/28] Due to their biological need for increased energy and nutrient requirements, pregnant and lactating women and children aged less than 2 years are especially vulnerable when health and nutrition are compromised, putting them at highest risk of food insecurity. In contrast, healthy and well-nourished individuals have the physical and cognitive capacity to care for themselves, their families and their communities, and the take risks inherent in changing behaviors, and thereby improve food security.

› **Water and Sanitation**: Water quality and the hygiene of the living environment have a direct impact on the biological utilization of food. The health consequences of relying on unsafe water sources and lacking access to sanitation reduce the body's ability to absorb the nutrients and therefore undermine

[23] Mercy Corps. (2015). *Addressing the root causes of complex crises: increasing resilience, strengthening governance, creating peaceful change – a companion paper to Responding to complex crises.*

[24] United Nations Population Fund Technical Division & International Institute for Environment and Development. (2011). Technical briefing: Urbanization and food prices (pp. 3).

[25] Klarreich, K. (2008). Food riots lead to Haitian meltdown. *TIME Magazine.* Retrieved from: http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1730607,00.html

[26] Simmons, E. (2013). Harvesting peace: food security, conflict, and cooperation. *Environmental Change & Security Program Report,*14(3). Retrieved from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/harvesting-peace-food-security-conflict-and-cooperation

[27] Lancet 2013, the maternal and child undernutrition series paper 1.

[28] von Grebmer, K., Ruel, M.T., Menon, P., Nestorova, B., Olofinbiyi, T., Fritschel, H., Thompson, J. (2010). 2010 *Global Hunger Index: The Challenge of Hunger, Focus on the Crisis of Child Undernutrition* (pp. 25). Bonn, Washington, DC, Dublin: International Food Policy Research Institute, Concern Worldwide, & Welthungerhilfe.

food security. Given the cyclical nature of diarrhea and malnutrition, a growing body of evidence emphasizes the importance of integrating water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), nutrition, and health interventions with food security programming.

> **Agriculture**: A strong agricultural and ecological base ensures the availability of nutritious food to eat and income for food and health purchases, while reducing vulnerability to natural disaster and food access shocks. Equitable land tenure and grazing rights are essential to allowing all producers to engage effectively in food production activities. In addition to providing income for smallholder farmers, efficient and expanding agricultural markets ensure sufficient food with diverse nutritional content is available at prices households can afford, thereby increasing both physical and economic access to food. Agriculture also relies on the natural resource base to maintain and increase production, and yet these resources, including soils and water, are under threat from overuse. In the agriculture sector, only climate resilient growth will support food security in the long term.

Equitable land tenure and grazing rights are essential to allowing all producers to engage effectively in food production activities.

Photo: Uganda - Crobbins

> **Governance**: Inclusive good governance from community to national levels provides an enabling environment that supports food security by enhancing stability, promoting security, providing a forum for inclusive decision-making, and establishing a framework that can guide official and business transactions. It provides the formal and informal structures and processes that can enhance agricultural and market productivity, deliver services such as health care and education, and disseminate critical information through vehicles such as early warning systems. Government institutions must create and enforce policies that support food security, and communities and citizens must have the capacity to advocate for the creation or revision of those policies as needed. Programs supporting improved governance build stronger relationships between civil society groups and government and provide improved dispute mitigation capacity, ultimately tackling the root causes of food insecurity and better ensuring community resilience.

> **Climate Change Adaptation**: In some of the world's most volatile and impoverished regions, climate change is exacerbating the problem of food insecurity, exposing more people to natural disasters and worsening an already unprecedented scarcity of resources, including water and arable land. By supporting communities in addressing and adapting to environmental changes—including programs

aimed at managing limited water supplies, promoting crops that thrive under new conditions, and teaching farmers to protect their land—we are targeting some of the root causes of food insecurity.

Mercy Corps' food security approach also incorporates the approaches that define our work more broadly.

〉 **Resilience**: Being food secure means being resilient to the diverse shocks and stresses that disrupt well-being. Communities with greater resilience—that have absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities in relation to shocks and stresses—are able to strengthen production and income generation, provide safety nets, and safeguard the health of the most vulnerable in spite of the challenges they encounter. Mercy Corps' resilience approach provides an overarching framework for deepening our understanding of interconnected systems and how their unique dynamics affect food security.

Photo: Timor Leste - M. Samper

In some of the world's most volatile and impoverished regions, climate change is exacerbating the problem of food insecurity.

〉 **Market Development**: Most people rely on markets to access their food, and an urbanizing world requires increasingly complex, geographically dispersed market systems to move nutritious food from farm to table. Poor populations also struggle to afford sufficient, nutritious foods for the whole family without consistent income sources. Increased consumption of healthy and diverse foods is not possible if people cannot afford to buy these foods.

〉 **Gender**: Evidence shows that food security is strengthened when men and women share decision-making and access to resources within the household, community and livelihood systems. Over the past few years, the centrality of women's role in food security has come into sharp focus. Women farmers produce 60–80 percent of food in most developing countries and are responsible for half of the world's food production. In the home, women—especially those in rural areas—are primarily responsible for food selection and preparation, playing a decisive role in their families' dietary diversity and health. Meanwhile, we see that when households struggle with acute hunger, gender-based violence soars while men and adolescents bear the brunt of risky coping strategies, such as migration, that can undermine progress toward longer term food security.

〉 **Humanitarian Response**: In both acute and chronic emergencies, households often struggle to meet immediate food needs, often undermining their long term productivity to meet short term needs. For example, a household may sell assets to purchase food or removing children from school so that they can earn income, strategies that can be destabilizing long term.

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within.
Now, and for the future.

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