



PROTECTING FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION IN COVID-19: OUR AGENCY APPROACH

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Introduction

The global community is facing a crisis of greater scale, urgency, and complexity than at any time since the Second World War. COVID-19 will infect millions of people, with many hundreds of thousands likely to die as the pandemic continues to spread around the world; but the impact goes far beyond the immediate effects of the illness. The spread of COVID-19 and efforts to contain it are already devastating economies and will strain the political and social fabric in contexts already overwhelmed by or at risk of natural disasters, conflict, and deteriorating livelihoods. The vulnerable will yet again be the most negatively impacted and face the steepest climb to recovery.

Mercy Corps' COVID response focuses on protecting and building food security, economic opportunity, and peace and stability - all severely under threat from the pandemic and its secondary impacts - in the world's most fragile environments. This includes a focus on ensuring that vaccines reach the last mile, and that vaccine distribution helps advance, rather than impedes, our development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding goals.



Leveraging our core strengths in building resilience and systems-strengthening, we partner with communities, local governments, and the private sector to strengthen their ability to cope with the crisis, minimize adverse effects, and foster long-term well-being. Throughout the pandemic, Mercy Corps will continue to respond to meet emergency needs while strengthening local systems to accelerate sustained recovery and lay the foundation for a better, more secure future.

Rationale: Investing in Food Security during COVID-19

COVID-19 has had profound implications for food and nutrition security, with the unfolding crisis affecting food systems,¹ threatening people's access to food and hampering efforts to reach Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2: 'Zero hunger.' The pandemic has decimated wage and remittance incomes and disrupted food supply chains. These factors have dramatically exacerbated already worsening trends in global hunger due to climate change and conflict. The WFP estimated that by January 2021 an additional 130 million people would need food assistance worldwide on top of the 135 million who were in need prior to the pandemic.² Even as the health effects of the pandemic subside, its effects on global food and nutrition security, and therefore the development prospects of many communities, will be long-lasting. The World Bank predicts that a global recovery may take upwards of five years.³

Economic slowdown due to rolling and sporadic lockdowns have eroded purchasing power and often resulted in higher food prices, affecting people's ability to consume a minimally adequate diet. According to the ILO, the equivalent of 255 million full-time jobs were lost in 2020.⁴ Many of the jobs lost were in the informal sector, in which 63% of the workers are women.⁵ Meanwhile, the cost of food globally in January 2021 was 4.3% higher than in December 2020 – marking the eighth month of consecutive rise in food prices. January 2021's prices were also 9.6% higher than a year prior.⁶ Families in low-income countries often allocate a larger portion of income on food, and even a modest increase in food prices can have a devastating impact on food access, especially as people are working less and bringing in less income. According to *The Lancet*, losses in gross national income in low- and middle-income countries due to the COVID crisis could increase the prevalence of moderate or severe wasting among children under five years old by 14.3%.⁷

Emergent disruptions from COVID-19 on domestic food supply have also constrained markets for nutritious food, particularly in fragile contexts where logistics and distribution are difficult even without morbidity and social distancing. Supply chain slow-downs lead to increased spoilage, particularly in places in hot climates and where increased curfews limited nighttime transport. Meanwhile, as health systems focus on containing and responding to the virus, critical services aimed at curbing malnutrition and tackling diseases that contribute to malnutrition, have waned. Early in the pandemic, UNICEF estimated an overall 30% reduction in essential nutrition service coverage, with upwards of 75 to 100% reduction in fragile countries experiencing humanitarian crises.⁸ In addition, school closures have disrupted school feeding programs, which can be a critical source of food for children.

¹ Mercy Corps defines food systems as that which, "encompasses all the interactions and processes related to food production and consumption – from farm to fork. It includes the extensive market supply, value chain and consumption patterns related to food (production, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal) and the various physiological, socio-cultural, economic, governance, and ecological factors that influence those processes."

² World Food Program. "Covid-19 will double the number of people facing food crises unless swift action is taken." April 21, 2020.

<https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>

³ <https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/world-bank-global-economic-recovery-will-take-5-years-2020-9-1029602044>

⁴ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_767028.pdf

⁵ <https://interactive.unwomen.org/multimedia/infographic/changingworldofwork/en/index.html>

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/worldfoodsituation/foodpricesindex/en/>, Viewed 2/8/2021

⁷ [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736\(20\)31647-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(20)31647-0/fulltext)

⁸ [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736\(20\)31647-0/fulltext#:~:text=Early%20in%20the%20COVID%2D19,where%20there%20are%20humanitarian%20crises.](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(20)31647-0/fulltext#:~:text=Early%20in%20the%20COVID%2D19,where%20there%20are%20humanitarian%20crises.)

[0/fulltext#:~:text=Early%20in%20the%20COVID%2D19,where%20there%20are%20humanitarian%20crises.](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(20)31647-0/fulltext#:~:text=Early%20in%20the%20COVID%2D19,where%20there%20are%20humanitarian%20crises.)

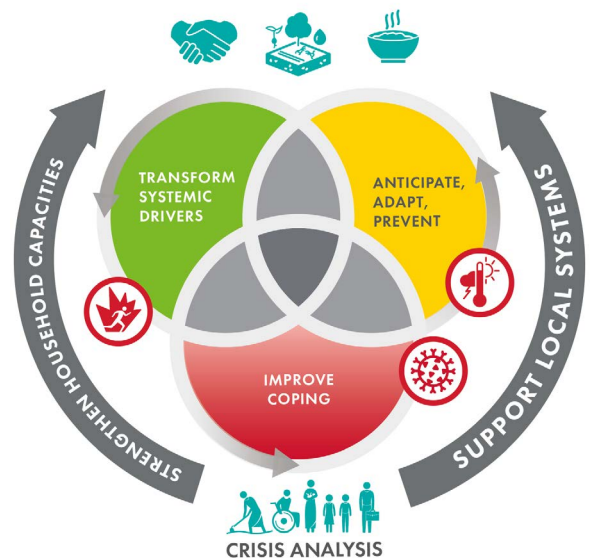
Recognizing that COVID is one more dimension in a complex web of challenges driving growing hunger, Mercy Corps has adapted and expanded to respond by enhancing its focus on building resilient households and markets.

Our Approach: Resilient Food Security in COVID-19

Mercy Corps' food security approach in the context of COVID-19 ensures crisis-affected households can meet their immediate food security and nutrition needs, while addressing the underlying drivers that repeatedly lead to poverty backsliding and growing food insecurity amidst disruptions like COVID-19. To achieve this, we focus on strengthening resilience capacities among crisis-affected households and building more resilient and inclusive food systems that can ensure food production, processing and distribution, local livelihoods, and nutritious food consumption are all sustained through crisis. Recognizing the differential impacts of COVID-19 on distinct gender, age, and other identity groups, we focus on the most marginalized populations. We tailor our work to facilitate more equitable access to resources and foster greater inclusion in local social and market systems that households rely on to meet their food and nutrition needs during and beyond crisis.

Working with local communities, businesses, and government, we focus on three interconnected pathways to achieve lasting food security in a world affected by COVID-19:

1. **Meeting urgent needs and improving local coping:** In acute crisis conditions, our responses focus on meeting immediate needs for nutritious foods while supporting improved coping. Our assistance includes cash and vouchers, wherever possible, to quickly meet urgent needs while keeping markets going, and partnering with government health and education programs to support community management of acute malnutrition and nutrition behavior change. This ensures households can preserve assets, keep children in school, and provide an adequate diet for all household members, particularly adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating mothers, and children under five. We take a Do No Harm approach to ensure our short-term assistance does not undermine the local market and social systems that people rely on to better cope.



2. **Preventing the escalation of food security crises:** Signs of rising food insecurity require early action that goes beyond meeting immediate needs to stop the escalating crisis in its tracks. We focus on shoring up local food systems, particularly in the last mile. We partner with traders, wholesalers, suppliers, and producers to support market continuity and ensure access and availability of nutritious food. We also work with governments to ensure safety nets are accessible to the most vulnerable. We support social cohesion across lines of tension and division to ensure food security crisis does not fuel violence and ensure households have access to informal community support systems.

3. **Transforming systemic drivers of food insecurity:** Even in the midst of crisis, we take the long view to seek out partnership and opportunities for large-scale, transformative solutions that can make food systems more inclusive and resilient over the long-term. This includes investing in new technology for climate-resilient agricultural production, broadening access to flexible financial services for households or strengthening management of natural resources that can improve production. We focus on inclusion and transforming social norms so that

women, youth, and other marginalized groups are able to benefit from improved systems while meeting their food and nutrition needs.

Programmatic Response: What We Do and How We Do it

Food security requires a multi-sectoral approach, which is reflected in our programmatic response that integrates cash, markets, health and nutrition behaviors, and social cohesion.

Strengthening Access to Cash and Safety Nets to Meet Urgent Needs: To help families cope with the impacts of volatile food prices, market disruptions closures, income loss, and illness resulting from COVID, Mercy Corps works with payment providers to distribute cash and vouchers so those families can meet urgent needs through local markets. Leveraging technology to achieve scale, cash transfers are accompanied by information dissemination on local COVID-19 related health, hygiene and vaccination services in an effort to combat misinformation (see [Peace and Stability COVID Approach Paper](#) for more details) and promote healthy behaviors. When feasible, we use cash transfers to support financial inclusion and livelihood adaptation, thus strengthening the building blocks of longer-term food security and economic development. We prevent the escalation of future COVID-induced food security crises by simultaneously working with national governments to expand formal safety-net systems to those most vulnerable to food insecurity (see our [Economic Opportunity COVID Approach Paper](#) for more details). This includes targeting people who are specifically at risk of food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 crisis (e.g., women employed in informal markets impacted by COVID-related closures or families who have lost remittance income) in addition to those already vulnerable before COVID (e.g., single-parent households, the elderly). We partner with communities to strengthen informal social safety nets through self-help groups and social networks, including local savings groups, embracing a Do No Harm approach to ensure our efforts do not undermine local sources of resilience. By working through local market and social systems to counter the economic impact of COVID on food security, we lay the foundation for future food and nutrition security while meeting immediate needs.

Reinforcing Small Business in the Local Food System: Given the importance of local production and micro, small- and medium enterprises to food availability in the midst of global COVID-19 disruptions, we support local businesses essential to the food system with a comprehensive emergency support package. This includes information, advice and capital - catered to overcome the specific barriers businesswomen face targeted at producers, processors and traders. Longer-term strategies involve supporting business continuity planning, digitization, and diversification of supply and output channels among others. We also support financial service providers adapt their products and services to meet the emergency financing needs of local enterprises, and support local financial institutions themselves to maintain or rebuild their liquidity (see our [Economic Opportunity COVID Approach Paper](#) for more details). Supporting local businesses in the food systems to adapt to crisis helps ensure food access and availability in the short and longer-term, while supporting more *resilient* food systems in the future.

Empowering Households to Prevent and Manage Malnutrition: To meet urgent nutrition needs when health institutions are overwhelmed by COVID-prevention and care, we empower caretakers to identify malnutrition in their children, help strengthen community health and referral systems, and where possible, integrate nutrition screenings and referrals into existing activities (e.g., cash distribution). Recognizing that good nutrition practices, including Infant and Young Child Feeding, are often cast aside during crises, we support behavior change strategies to encourage families coping with the impact of the COVID crisis to maintain good nutrition practices. This includes women's participation in household budgeting and income management. We promote perma gardening, including in urban areas, so households can grow fresh fruits and vegetables despite COVID-related income and market constraints. Reducing the spread of COVID and other illnesses that drive poor nutrition outcomes is equally important. To that end, we promote

hygiene behaviors and materials while concurrently promoting improved water supply and sanitation facilities to reduce transmission of COVID and other illnesses that curb nutrient absorption. We use the crisis as an opportunity, partnering with government and the private sector to facilitate improved water governance, and more sustainable water and sanitation systems and services. Finally, we support Ministries of Health with planning, budgeting and coordination to maintain and improve nutrition and other services that support proper food utilization – despite limits on resources during the COVID Crisis.

Promoting Social Cohesion & Integrating Conflict Sensitivity: The links between conflict and food insecurity highlight the importance promoting social cohesion and integrating conflict sensitivity in our food security response to COVID. Indeed, the COVID crisis has frayed the social fabric and contributed to social unrest around the world, which further threatens food security (see [Peace and Stability COVID Approach Paper](#) for more details). To support social cohesion, we counter COVID-related misinformation by leveraging existing communication networks - online and offline - to amplify locally trusted sources of accurate information. We mitigate grievances by drawing on our tools and approaches in Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity to ensure that our food security response to the COVID crisis does not inadvertently increase tensions and divisions. Finally, we counter mistrust and grievances due to poor COVID response by promoting inclusive, responsive, and effective service delivery in health and disaster response. We do this by applying our governance capacity strengthening models, particularly around social safety nets and nutrition and health services.

Analysis and Research

The ways in which the pandemic has impacted food security has changed frequently and differed across contexts, requiring shifts in how we understand and respond. Mercy Corps is invested in continuous analysis, research and learning to inform our own practice, that of implementing partners and to guide policy makers.

Mercy Corps routinely integrates data and analytics in our work to inform and improve decision-making in crisis contexts.⁹ By layering information from primary sources, open sources and responders' programmatic data, and combining it with analysis by subject matter experts,¹⁰ our crisis analytics reporting informs both strategic and contingency planning as well as ground-level tactical decision-making and risk management.¹¹ In DRC, for example, the HAT was able to predict areas where future conflict could result in access constraints, enabling our team to adapt our emergency food security response to ensure program continuity based on that information. Enabled by the Mercy Corps COVID Resilience Fund, Mercy Corps' Global Crisis Analytics team has delivered critical in-depth comparative systems analysis on how COVID-19 affects terms of trade, food prices, displacement, and other factors affecting food security in countries where pre-existing development and humanitarian challenges are exacerbated by the pandemic. In combination with open-source data, our crisis analytics allows our teams to stay ahead of impending crises, ensures we are meeting the needs of the right participants, and helps us tailor our response to the specific COVID-19 dynamics in a given context.

Beyond grounding our interventions in analysis, our food security approach in COVID-19 is informed by research and evidence. Through our response, we will continue to invest in research to understand what works and what matters to sustain household food and nutrition outcomes through COVID-19 and multiplying crises. Mercy Corps research methodology focuses on identifying and analyzing determinants of food security resilience in crisis contexts,¹² and uncovering linkages across sectors - markets, governance, WaSH, health and more - that drive positive food security

⁹ [Crisis Analytics Factsheet](#), Mercy Corps. April 2020.

¹⁰ [Crisis Analytics Strategy FY 2021](#). Mercy Corps. November 2020.

¹¹ [Crisis Analytics Factsheet](#), Mercy Corps. April 2020.

¹² For example: [Food Security Strategies for Complex Crises](#), 2018.

outcomes in crises. This includes primary research on the role of social networks in household food security in South Sudan,¹³ the importance of social networks and markets for food security in Syria,¹⁴ and more.¹⁵ In addition, continued research and learning throughout program implementation on what works to drive food security outcomes in crises is a key aspect of our flagship food security programs. For example, in northern Kenya, we have embarked on a multi-year partnership with the government of Kenya to better understand both the drivers of persistent acute malnutrition and the most efficient way we can reverse those drivers. In eastern DRC, we embedded recurrent monitoring into our multi-year food security program to more regularly reflect on whether program activities are building truly *resilient* food security given the multitude of shocks experienced in the area, including COVID-related ones. In the context of COVID, this analytical approach and growing evidence-base on what supports resilient food security has provided a framework to capture, document and design impactful programming that enhances food security in the context of the COVID crisis.

Recommendations for Donors and Implementers

Donor institutions and governments should:

- **Expand emergency basic needs assistance to avoid the worst of COVID's secondary impacts.** The humanitarian community has yet to see an increase in humanitarian assistance to meet growing needs from COVID. To prevent backsliding, already overburdened humanitarian response programs require additional funding to meet basic needs. Given the effects of COVID on health systems, cash-based food assistance must be accompanied by malnutrition monitoring and referrals as well as support to nutrition behavior change efforts related to COVID.
- **Extend emergency relief packages for essential businesses and local institutions in the food system affected by COVID-19.** Supporting small businesses in local food systems, including agricultural production, processing, trade and distribution is essential to sustaining food access and availability through the COVID crisis, and ensuring short-term response does not undermine food system performance in the future.
- **Support and expand government-led safety nets,** to ensure social protection and insurance is streamlined, expanded, and reaches all those most affected. This also ensures crisis-affected countries are better prepared to address future risks.
- **Increase flexible, long-term funding to address COVID's near and medium-term impacts on food security.** Building resilient food security in the midst of the pandemic requires longer-term programming, while ensuring early, rapid action in response to impending and acute emergency needs. Early warning mechanisms like FEWSNET must be tied to financial resources to take earlier action in response. This includes support to crisis modifiers, which ensure that existing programming can pivot to address crises without undermining development goals, as well as multi-year emergency programming.
- **Invest in more resilient and inclusive food systems to build back better.** The COVID crisis has highlighted the weakness of global food systems to manage large-scale shocks. Donors should reaffirm their commitment to food security while also underscoring the need for resilient and sustainable *local* food systems that supply nutritious and affordable food to the last mile.
- **Support women and youth empowerment in the food system.** Donors must ensure a secondary-impact response to COVID takes a gendered lens, given the critical role of women in the food system, and their

¹³ <https://www.mercycorps.org/currency-connections>

¹⁴ <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/wages-war>

¹⁵ For example, our research from a pastoral resilience program in Ethiopia: <https://www.mercycorps.org/research-resources/enhancing-resilience-drought>

vulnerability to food system related disruptions. This includes addressing systemic barriers compromising equitable participation in agricultural production, processing, and local market importation and distribution.

Implementing agencies should:

- **Continue to re-assess and adapt a response to the shifting nature of the COVID Crisis.** Our understanding of the impacts of COVID on food security (from household to global levels) has shifted tremendously and frequently over the last year. Continuing to investigate the evolving food security context and how to counter negative impacts is critical, as is continued programmatic adaptation as we learn more. This requires a substantial investment on analysis and rapid response plans at both household and community levels as well as regionally and globally.
- **Embed nutrition- and COVID-related information within cash transfers** to promote the adoption of appropriate nutrition and COVID-related behaviors and to build trust with health systems and vaccination campaigns.
- **Support and invest in local markets and social systems as part of humanitarian response.** It is essential that responses that avert and mitigate impending food security crises in response to COVID-19 also support local systems. Funding mechanisms must be made available to support private sector partnerships—for formal businesses, but also informal institutions, that are the bedrock of economies across low-income countries.
- **Adjust targeting practices to address COVID-specific and COVID-amplified vulnerabilities.** Conventional targeting practices for humanitarian assistance and safety nets must be overhauled to better capture characteristics of vulnerability driven from the COVID Crisis. Criteria should adapt based on continuous analysis that aims to better understand how the pandemic has impacted different people and different contexts.
- **Counter COVID-related tensions by incorporating Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity in food security programming.** Given the impact of COVID on social cohesion, it is more important than ever to incorporate Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity into activities aimed to improve food security.

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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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