



# RESILIENT FOOD SECURITY IN CONFLICT-DRIVEN CRISES

## Mercy Corps' Approach

MARCH 2021

### Background: Food Security and Conflict

In 2020, the number of people facing undernutrition globally grew to between 720 and 811 million people globally as a result of a series of crises: the Coronavirus pandemic, climate change, and conflict and instability.<sup>1</sup> Even before the Coronavirus pandemic, more than two billion people around the world experienced either severe or moderate food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Despite decades of progress in the fight against global malnutrition, five percent more people (or 34.5 million more individuals) were undernourished in 2019 than just five years before.<sup>3</sup> Food insecurity drives people to engage in harmful coping strategies to feed their hunger. When experiencing extreme poverty and plagued by the constant and physical reminder of hunger, people will use their very last reserves – in terms of savings, social capital, and even human dignity – to

<sup>1</sup> FAO et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming Food Systems for Food Security, Improved Nutrition and Healthy Diets for All* (Rome: FAO, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> FAO et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming Food Systems to Deliver Affordable Health Diets for All*, (Rome: FAO, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

continue to feed themselves and their families. This can have long-term impacts: when families skip, reduce, or lower the quality of meals, the growth of children’s bodies is stunted and cognitive capacities reduced. Food insecurity also limits economic potential when families sell productive assets, remove children from school, avoid paying for costly yet necessary medical treatments, and more. Consequently, worsening food insecurity is often a “canary in the coalmine” indicator; where emergency-levels of food insecurity and malnutrition exists, it suggests that people are deploying more and more desperate coping strategies to survive.

Hunger has increasingly clustered in the world’s most fragile, conflict-affected environments. Conflict and extreme fragility are the primary reason why the number of undernourished people in the world has been steadily increasing.<sup>4</sup> Notably even as the economic impacts of Coronavirus pandemic on economies has indiscriminately increased food insecurity around the world, fragile and conflict-affected communities remain the most at risk of tipping into famine as a result of this additional pressure. Protracted civil conflict in Yemen, South Sudan, northeast Nigeria, and Syria, for example, have driven millions of people into crisis-levels of hunger due to displacement, disruptions to food production, and barriers to market activity – all as a result of extreme levels of violence and insecurity. Added to that are the impacts of scorched-earth strategies, when conflict-parties deliberately destroy food stores, burn farm fields, shell food production and market infrastructure, and block food trade routes to starve opposition-aligned populations. Though this paper specifically focuses on places experiencing war, where conflict exists at a more community level – such as between pastoralist and/or farmer groups – fear of violence limits movement and dis-incentivizes investments that could improve livelihood productivity. Unsurprisingly, FAO estimated in 2017 that 60 percent of the people in the world who were chronically food insecure or undernourished lived in countries affected by protracted, violent conflict.<sup>5</sup>



### FROM DROUGHT TO FRAGILITY AND HUMANITARIAN EMERGENCY IN SYRIA

*Syria’s on-going crisis is a prime example of this trap, where severe drought in the mid-2000s both increased the price of bread for consumers and also drove rural farmers to urban centers seeking work. Global wheat price spikes in the late-2000s and general discontent among the swollen urban population, laid a foundation for the Syrian revolution. The Syrian government’s inadequate response to the grievances highlighted in that revolution sowed further agitation. The war that followed – and the widespread and deliberate targeting of civilian populations and the widespread destruction of infrastructure (irrigation systems, factories, transportation networks) – both drove mass displacement and a shocking level of humanitarian need – including food insecurity.*

**Conflict-Driven Crises:** A crisis where violent conflict or warfare is a dominant characteristic and driver of the crisis. Severe security risks can make it difficult for humanitarian actors to access populations in need of assistance. Secondary impacts from conflict – such as disruptions in markets, public services, mass displacement, etc. – contribute to an array of impacts on wellbeing in addition to direct impact of violence. Conflict-Driven Crises are often protracted, reflecting the changing nature of conflict, which rarely have distinct start and end points and are often lock in endless cycles of violence and instability for many years.

Food insecurity and its drivers can also instigate conflict. In already fragile places, repeated shocks and longer-term stresses (including those from climate change, other natural disasters, economic calamities, and disease and virus outbreaks) undermine food security among the world’s most vulnerable. Under repeated assault, these communities can become trapped in a cycle of increasing hunger and conflict: fragility and inability of (or lack of desire from) states actors to respond to these disturbances drives economic failure, inequality and

<sup>4</sup> WFP. *Winning the Peace in Humanitarian Emergencies*, (Rome: WFP, 2020)

<sup>5</sup> FAO et al., *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2017. Building Resilience for Peace and Food Security* (Rome: FAO, 2017).

grievances, and resource competition – all of which can contribute to conflict, which then further drives poverty and hunger.<sup>6</sup>

In conflict-driven crises, constrained humanitarian access combined with substantial need can result in programming to revert to quick, stop-gap response measures aimed at avoiding emergency- or even famine-levels of food insecurity. This often includes a combination of distributing food or cash to purchase food, providing seeds and basic tools to farmers, screening and treating acute malnutrition, offering basic information on child feeding or hygiene. Such actions measures are often appropriate to provide life-saving assistance in the aftermath of acute shocks, such as in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster or sudden displacement or when active violence creates a barrier to meeting immediate food needs.

Yet, in places such as Syria, Yemen, South Sudan, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and northeast Nigeria such strategies have been deployed for years upon years, with little *lasting* impact. According to OCHA, the average humanitarian crisis lasts more than nine years, and in 2018 nearly three-quarters of people targeted for humanitarian assistance were affected by the crisis for at least seven years.<sup>7</sup> While short-term programming is critical to stave-off the worse impacts of extreme food insecurity in high crisis conditions (such as famine), it does little to upend either the underlying or new drivers of food insecurity, perpetuates dependence on humanitarian assistance, and disempowers affected communities - and the institutions they rely on - to deploy more sustainable strategies to survive and thrive. Aid can also be manipulated by conflict parties and even further escalate conflict,<sup>8</sup> and it can also undermine existing coping strategies that people rely on both during and after conflict, such as when local markets and livelihoods are disrupted by the distribution of free goods and services. Consequently, such stop-gap measures should be reserved for exigent circumstances and undertaken in a way that does not undermine future wellbeing.

This paper proposes a different approach to building food security in complex crises: a multi-year and multi-dimensional, context-specific response strategy aimed at delivering immediate relief wherever necessary, without compromising long-term well-being. This includes addressing systemic barriers to food and nutrition security while also building the capacities of individuals and households to manage shocks that undermine food security more effectively. This approach to food security is forged by our front-line experience and substantiated by our resilience research from various complex crises around the world.

## An Approach: Building Resilient Food Security in Crises

Pathways towards food security are inherently complex, even in non-crises contexts. Conventional frameworks for food security envision it as dependent on three pillars – food access, food availability and food utilization – all of which must be *stable* (or

**Food Security:** Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. It is dependent on three pillars – food access, food availability and food utilization – all of which must be stable over time.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: CS Hendrix and HJ Brinkman, "Food Insecurity and Conflict Dynamics: Causal Linkages and Complex Feedbacks," *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development*, no. 2 (2013): 1–12, and Ellen Messer, Marc J Cohen, and Thomas Marchione, "Conflict: A Cause and Effect of Hunger," Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2000.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "US\$21.9 billion needed in 2019 as average length of humanitarian crises climbs", December 4, 2018. Available here: <https://www.unocha.org/story/us219-billion-needed-2019-average-length-humanitarian-crises-climbs#:~:text=Projected%20needs,lasts%20more%20than%20nine%20years>.

<sup>8</sup> "Humanitarian Aid as a Weapon of War," *Armed Conflict Survey*. Vol. 5, No. 1 (2019): 14-20.

continuous) over time.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, sustaining food security is not possible without some degree of resilience. People’s capacity to maintain access, availability and utilization of food while experiencing the multitude of shocks and stresses (whether they be conflict, climate, health or market-related) is crucial to avoid tipping into a food security crisis - or even famine.

Mercy Corps applies a resilience approach to all our programming, the design of which is guided by the five resilience questions (see Figure 1). Building resilient food security in conflict-driven crises requires us to answer these questions just as we would in more stable contexts. Understanding the relationship between shocks, evolving risk factors, and systemic drivers to food insecurity in conflict contexts - and strengthening the capacities needed to mitigate those risks in both the short and long-term - is the first step towards building food security in conflict-driven crises. How international actors working in conflict settings support and strengthen those capacities underpins this approach.



## THE FIVE RESILIENCE QUESTIONS

To develop strategies to build resilience, Mercy Corps’ resilience analysis is centered on five basic questions:

### *Resilience to What End?*

*What well-being outcome are we aiming for?;*

### *Resilience of What?*

*What systems, context etc., are we trying to build resilience within;*

### *Resilience for Whom?*

*What groups of people are we trying to make more resilient?;*

*Resilience to What? What specific shocks or stresses are we trying to build resilience against?; and*

### *Resilience Through*

*What? What types of capacities, or resources and strategies, do people need to deploy in order to maintain their wellbeing in the face of shocks?*



Figure 1: The Five Resilience Questions

## Embrace Multidimensional Resilience Pathways

The fluid and complex nature of conflict-driven crises requires a multidimensional response to build resilient food security. That response must focus on building the capacity of people and systems to maintain or improve food security in the face of conflict and the many covariate *and* idiosyncratic shocks that they face. This includes bolstering conflict-affected people’s capacities to meet immediate food needs while also investing in the future. It also includes, in parallel, strengthening the capacity of systems that families rely on to meet food needs despite ongoing conflict: local markets, social networks, and basic services. These systems are critical for families’ survival during crisis and represent a foundation for long-term recovery. In more contexts experiencing extreme levels of violence and volatility, it may be more difficult to build the capacity of systems themselves, but we can still work through them.

<sup>9</sup> The “three pillar” framework is born out the 1996 World Food Summit , which declared that food security “exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” Since then, additional “pillars” have been added to the original three (access, availability and utilization) including “stability”. More recently “agency” has been suggested as a fifth pillar to be considered.

Capacities may work to build resilience in different ways. In some cases, those capacities may aim to **meet urgent needs**. In other situations, the capacity may help **avoid backsliding** or even **prevent escalation** of a food security crisis. And, other capacities may facilitate more transformative and sustainable change as we



## RESILIENCE CAPACITIES FOR FOOD SECURITY IN CRISIS

**Meet Urgent Needs:** *Ensure people have the minimum goods and services they need for survival – food, water, shelter, healthcare, etc.*

**Avoid Backsliding:** *Ensure people or institutions access resources to adapt as best they can manage the effects of crisis at hand, without compromising future food security*

**Prevent Crisis Escalation:** *Address downstream effects of food security crises and newly emerging risks, including triggers of violence that may reignite or further exacerbate food crises conditions*

**Transform Drivers:** *Tackle the root cause of food insecurity and drivers of vulnerability*

aim to **transform the drivers** of food security crises.<sup>10</sup> Such an approach can also be applied to non-conflict-based crises. Crucially, however, it also works for contexts experiencing conflict.

The widening and narrowing of humanitarian access following hotter and cooler conflict trends – often followed by the changing depth of the food security crisis – require food security actors to pivot and adapt to the fluid context that they operate within. Crucially, pockets of stability exist even amidst crisis. The presence of conflict and general insecurity should not preclude aid actors from considering more sustainable or even transformative approaches. Although it may be difficult in the midst of a humanitarian crisis to identify opportunities to invest in more long-term approaches, doing so will enable humanitarians to break-free from endless cycles of assistance while providing inroads for other aid actors to engage in conflict contexts. In many conflict-driven crises, the “normal” work of government carries on, and markets continue to provide goods and services. This reality provides an opportunity to engage in more “development-focused” initiatives that may positively impact even the most conflict-affected areas while still abiding by humanitarian principles.

*Figure 2 depicts a suite of capacities that a food security program may consider supporting throughout a conflict-driven crisis, including capacities aimed at individuals as well as those aimed at systems. Note: the figure is an example of what this may look like, but different contexts and analysis may lead to the identification of very different capacities and interventions – and placement. On the bottom of the y-axis, it is clearly appropriate to engage in core humanitarian assistance activities to address famine, but as the depth of the crisis lessens towards emergency or even crisis-levels of food insecurity (often tracking with less active conflict), other interventions that aim to have more sustained and possibly transformative impact are advised. Note that the capacities spread from individual to systems-level at every level of the crisis (x-axis). Also note that even at emergency or crisis-levels of food insecurity, it may be possible to support capacities that meet urgent needs, avoid backsliding, prevent crisis escalation, and, possibly even transform drivers.*

Intervention options should not be bound by “humanitarian” or “development” biases; instead, activities and interventions should be focused on the resilience capacity they are designed to build. Identifying which intervention-type to build the capacity is most appropriate at a given moment to avoid harmful coping in short term while supporting long-term food security goals, will change depending on the level of stability and depth of crisis. For example, to increase food production: in highly unstable and insecure contexts the minimum a program may be able to achieve is to meet urgent needs through the distribution of vouchers or cash to purchase seeds through local markets. In more stable contexts, however, a program may aim to transform drivers by working with input vendors to provide financing options to clients seeking purchase of inputs, while

<sup>10</sup> Petryniak, Olga, Keith Proctor and Jon Kurtz. *Towards Resilience: Advancing Collective Impact in Protracted Crises*. (Washington, DC: Mercy Corps, 2020).

also embedding extension services in their product sales to improve successful use of the inputs they sell. Mercy Corps' [Cultivating Stability Approach](#) provides examples on how to do this within agricultural programs.

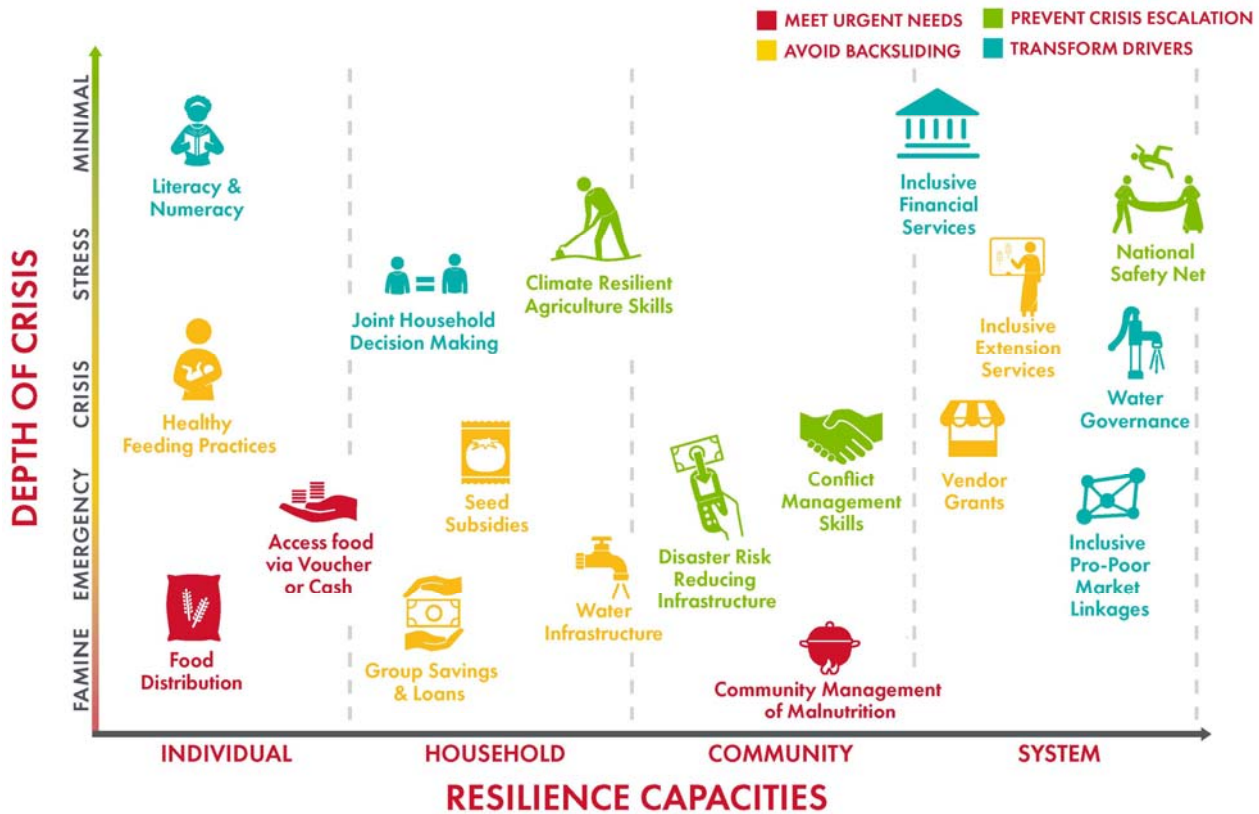


Figure 2: Example Spectrum of Food Security Interventions

## Focus Capacity Strengthening in a Food Systems Framework

Strengthening sources of resilience to achieve food security outcomes requires a systems lens. The impacts of conflict-related shocks and stresses at different points in the food system can have a broad reverberating effect on food insecurity. By using a food systems lens, we can better understand the complex web of factors that drive food insecurity in conflict, and identify leverage points across the food system as a whole to affect change within fragile and fluid contexts. Frequently, people living in the midst of conflict rely on local systems even more than they do on humanitarian aid to meet basic needs, including food.

Supporting the five food systems to meet food security needs for conflict-affected populations, requires interventions that shore-up and build capacity within the food system to better function in the midst of crisis, and ultimately transform to sustain food security over-time. Examples of how those resilience pathways may strengthen different systems are detailed below.

## WHAT ARE FOOD SYSTEMS?

A food system encompasses all the interactions and processes related to food production and consumption – from farm to mouth and waste. It includes the ways in which food is produced, harvested, processed, distributed, consumed and disposed; the numerous people and institutions that drive and are affected by those processes and interactions; and the influences of various physiological, socio-cultural, economic, political/governance, ecological, and infrastructural factors that shape the system. A food system involves the extensive food supply chain, the governance of it across multiple systems and how people interact with it. For that food system to drive resilient food security, those interactions and processes should be cyclical and reinforcing, adapt and absorb shocks and stresses, and ultimately enable equitable, stable and autonomous access, availability and utilization of healthy food. A food systems lens is embedded within Mercy Corps' overarching [Food Security Approach](#).

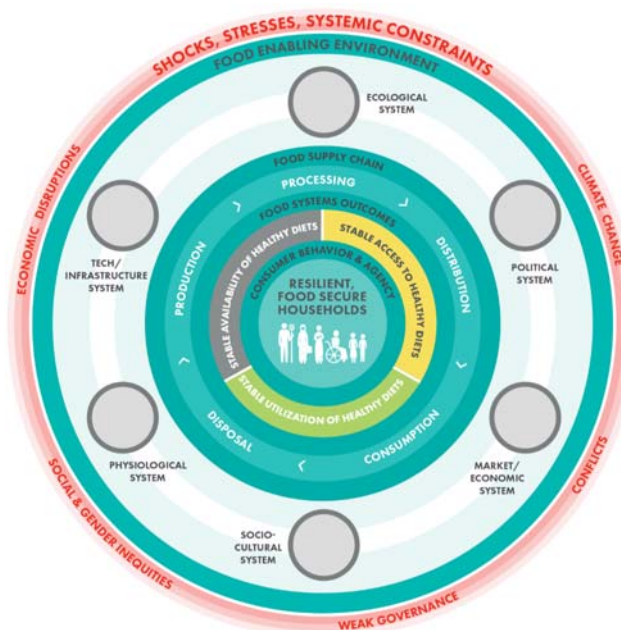


Figure 3: Food Systems Framework

## Physiological Systems

In conflict-driven crises access to health, nutrition, water and sanitation services and products can be disrupted due to displacement, shifts in government priorities, and more, contributing to undernutrition. The psychological impact of conflict can also impact physiological systems; for example, conflict-induced stress and trauma – as well as lack of privacy for displaced women – often leads to reduced breastfeeding, leaving infants more susceptible to malnutrition and illness. In conflict-driven crises, we can strengthen physiological systems to support food security by:

- › **Meeting urgent needs:** Address immediate health concerns, including supporting access to basic health services and products and identifying and treating cases of acute malnutrition.
- › **Avoiding backsliding and prevent escalation:** Invest in preventative measures, such as: community-managed water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) infrastructure, goods and services; infant and young child feeding (ICYF) counselling and support; distributing of folic acid and iron supplements to pregnant and lactating women; or providing food assistance for those most acutely at risk of undernutrition.
- › **Transforming drivers:** Strengthen national nutrition and health services through training Ministry of Health staff and supporting health and nutrition supply chain management, and engage in comprehensive social and behavior change strategies for nutrition and health.

## Socio-Cultural Systems

Socio-cultural systems often provide the first line of support that people of different genders, ages, ethnicities and/or clans (and other identities) rely on when facing crisis. Socio-cultural systems can also reinforce inequality, marginalization and harmful beliefs and practices that contribute to food insecurity. Conflict, however, disrupts these systems within families and communities, ultimately impacting both household and

community-level food security. In conflict-affected crises, we can strengthen socio-cultural systems to support food security by:

- › **Meeting urgent needs:** Improve targeting strategies by soliciting feedback from a diverse group of stakeholders, including marginalized groups – such as women and girls.
- › **Avoiding backsliding and prevent escalation:** Conducting, at minimum, Do No Harm analysis when designing emergency food assistance and other interventions in support of food security.
- › **Transforming drivers:** Engaging men and women in household decision-making counseling, forming youth groups to advocate for youth-specific needs, and strengthen social cohesion and capital by facilitating dialoged and community mobilization across and within conflict lines to collectively solve food security challenges.

## › **SOCIAL CONNECTIONS IN SOUTH SUDAN**

*Mercy Corps’ “Currency of Connections” research in South Sudan and northern Uganda found that social connections help families access food and other basic needs and that social connections help facilitate trade among communities across conflict-party lines. In South Sudan, for example, aid recipients share assistance knowing that doing so may come at the expense of their own food security in the immediate term, but recognizing that in the longer term, they will be able to leverage the relationship built by doing so to secure information about safe passage, to generate livelihood opportunities, or to be able to reliably access reciprocal support (such as food) if needed. At the same time, humanitarian programming can also undermine informal social support systems.*

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## **Market Systems**

Food security can be gravely affected by the impact conflict has on markets systems; high food prices and shortages due to broken trade routes is just one example of how. Yet market systems are also highly adaptive and can deliver goods and services to conflict-affected people in even the most insecure environments. Even though cash-based transfers can help maintain markets and other systems during crises they are ultimately unsustainable on their own.<sup>11</sup> Addressing constraints in market system may be difficult in conflict-affected contexts, but it is not impossible; Mercy Corps’ [Beyond Cash Approach](#) explains how. For example, we can strengthen market systems in conflict-driven crises by:

- › **Meeting urgent needs:** Keeping markets functional by using cash-based approaches to facilitate food assistance
- › **Avoiding backsliding and prevent escalation:** Supporting traders and transporters to coordinate more effectively or by providing grants if they have lost working capital to source goods to keep food prices affordable.
- › **Transforming drivers:** Analyzing markets beyond basic trade, and working through local actors to improve the functions, rules,

## › **SUBSIDIZING BAKERIES IN SYRIA**

*High wheat prices in Syria made it difficult for conflict-affected families to buy bread. To reduce bread prices at scale, Mercy Corps subsidized wheat flour to bakeries across Aleppo, supporting local businesses while reducing food prices across the region. Cheaper bread meant that conflict-affected Syrians could afford it more easily – and that the savings could be invested in assets that further support food security, such as small livestock.*

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<sup>11</sup> Hemberger, Alison. “Beyond Cash: Making markets work in crises.” (Washington, DC: Mercy Corps, March 2018. [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/CashMarketsMercyCorpsApril2018\\_0.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/CashMarketsMercyCorpsApril2018_0.pdf).)



and norms and support local economies, such as strengthening information networks or improving access to finance in informal markets.

## Governance Systems

That conflict is an underlying driver of food insecurity in these contexts is only one way in which governance systems are relevant to food security. Policies that impact food systems – such as formal and informal tax and trade policies (including conflict-related blockages) – also influence access to food and the inputs to produce it, for example. In conflict-affected crises, we can strengthen governance systems to support food security by:

- › **Meeting urgent needs:** Adopting conflict-sensitive approaches, at minimum, in targeting and other food assistance implementation decisions based on holistic needs analysis.
- › **Avoiding backsliding and prevent escalation:** Working with local authorities – potentially including informal leadership structures erected in conflict areas – to create an enabling environment for food security despite high levels of fragility, such as keeping trade routes open and minimizing informal trade taxation.
- › **Transforming drivers:** Capacitate government to develop social safety net, work with civil society to encourage state-adoption of nutrition policy reforms (e.g. mandatory fortification of staple foods), tackle root causes of the conflict itself through dedicated peacebuilding and conflict management efforts, and shift governance dynamics that cause conflict (specifically: state capacity or legitimacy, exclusion and marginalization, and weak civic engagement).

## Ecological Systems

In conflict-driven crises access to essential natural resources is constrained, and governing bodies are less able to respond to natural disasters – including those resulting from climate change. We can further strengthen ecological systems in conflict-driven crises by:

- › **Meeting urgent needs:** Including fuel and water costs in food basket calculations for cash transfers, and ensuring appropriate seasonal timing of interventions supporting agricultural inputs (e.g. during planting season).
- › **Avoiding backsliding and prevent escalation:** Investing in disaster risk reduction; support drought-resistant agricultural inputs and promoting climate resilient agricultural practices.
- › **Transforming drivers:** Working with community leaders and groups to reinforce and develop natural resource management agreements and disaster early warning systems.



### COOKSTOVES IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA

*Limited access to fuel in crowded garrison towns in NE Nigeria meant that conflict-affected households risked confrontation with armed groups to collect wood far from town and were therefore less likely to purchase foods that required a lengthy cooking process, such as beans. To address wood fuel shortages, Mercy Corps built a market-informed cookstove component into a food security program, reducing the amount of fuel needed for already vulnerable households to cook food.*

## Continue to Meet Humanitarian Needs Responsibly

Ultimately, meeting urgent needs through humanitarian action during acute crisis periods, or in pockets of acute crisis, is essential, and food security interventions must still save lives and livelihoods. Embracing minimum standards, such as Sphere, mainstreaming protection, and proactively coordinating with other

humanitarian actors to ensure conflict-affected households access enough food to meet minimum nutritional needs, is part and parcel to our approach towards resilience. Such humanitarian action is crucial to avoid both loss of life and the use of harmful coping strategies. At the same time, providing humanitarian assistance without undermining future wellbeing must also be a key goal. Hence, deciding between in-kind or market-based approaches to meet food needs, for example, must account for the market, governance, ecological, socio-economic and physiological systems that comprise of the broader food system.

## Operationalizing Resilient Food Security Responses in Conflict-Driven Crises

Operationalizing this towards resilience framework in food security programs in conflict-driven crises requires programs to invest in better analysis, strategy and response processes. Below are key steps in this process.

### Analyze Food Systems to Uncover Drivers & Identify Leverage

At the emergence of a crisis, early assessments focus on the unfolding emergency: number of people displaced, malnutrition caseload, volume of crops lost, food prices, etc. Such information is obviously important but understanding the broader food system and the drivers of food insecurity is even more important to move beyond strictly humanitarian relief efforts.

Understanding how the different systems that comprise of the broader food system function within a crisis context is crucial to be able to identify leverage points to improve food security. Such leverage points often exist where the different factors (or variables) of a food system become self-reinforcing. A simplistic example may be: change in food prices leads to hunger, which leads to civil unrest, which leads to broken market-supply chains, which leads to change in food prices, and then the cycle starts again. You can see in this example how a market-system variable can impact variables in social and governance systems and visa-versa. Finding a way to break that cycle is critical to reverse the loop. Other leverage points may be a node where many different factors are linked through one specific factor.

Without a systems lens, food security interventions in conflict-driven crises are unlikely to have sustained impact and can even do harm.

For example, an unclear understanding of social systems within a community may result in program approaches that either reinforce or undermine inequitable power dynamics that contribute to food insecurity.



#### IDENTIFY PRE-CRISIS CAUSES OF FOOD INSECURITY

*Analysis of food security in a crisis often focus specifically on crisis-related drivers to food insecurity. However, conflict often exacerbates pre-existing conditions that contribute to food insecurity; understanding pre-crisis constraints can help shape interventions to have more lasting impact. Consider South Sudan, Yemen and Somalia: populations with Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM)-levels above 15 percent are considered to be in a “critical” emergency, but malnutrition levels in these three countries exceeded this threshold before the conflict conditions that contributed to famine warnings in 2018. Behavioral practices or environmental constraints to food security that existed before a crisis are likely to continue to be a barrier to food insecurity during the conflict, for example. This includes gender-based norms that consistently contribute to poorer food security and nutrition outcomes for women and girls as compared to their male counterparts. It is possible to address these constraints within food security programs in conflict contexts – even if that means merely acknowledging the limitations of certain approaches.*

While a systems-based approach is necessary to transform food security in conflict-driven crises, equally necessary is ensuring that approach is rooted in understanding how those systems interact with *people*. Often the people that are the most food insecure are excluded from those very system functions that can provide food security. Without fully articulating systemic constraints food security for different population subgroups within any given context, implementers risk missing the mark to build food security for those with the greatest need even if they do bolster food systems. Understanding the specific vulnerabilities, labor burdens and other barriers to food security of different sub-populations will help programs design with people at the center.

## Assess Risks and Scenarios to Food System Functions

After the basic system is understood, we can layer onto our analysis the many potential risks – including idiosyncratic and covariate shocks – that could disrupt that system in the future as well as other scenarios that may impact the food system.

Conflict-related shocks – such as higher food prices due to breakages in trade networks, sharp reductions in food availability due to razing of farm fields and grain silos, and illness due to displacement from clean water sources – can have a grave impact on food security. Humanitarian aid can in itself cause disturbances; for example, in-kind food assistance can undermine markets that households rely on for income and food access, even in crisis settings. It can drive down demand for food from local markets and producers, further destabilizing the very systems that grow and sell food to crisis-affected communities. Likewise, as noted above, food assistance in any form can be manipulated by local governance systems to further war-efforts. In addition, a minimum of local-level conflict analysis to understand these dynamic and key stakeholders is recommended.

At the same time, conflict makes it even more challenging for communities to deal with a range of other shocks that further destabilize food security, including drought, floods, pests, illnesses and disease, etc. Widespread flooding in South Sudan, locusts in Yemen, monsoons in Myanmar or Bangladesh, etc., have all gravely impacted what stabilizing effects humanitarian actors have made in maintaining food security in those conflict-driven crises. Community and national institutions that would normally have some capacity to respond to such natural disasters are unable (or are simply unwilling) to do so when their country is engulfed by conflict. Failure to account for the potential these types of events can have to undermine food security, and awareness of these threats is crucial to identifying the resilience capacities necessary to build food security even within a conflict-driven crisis.

In addition to specific shocks, it is equally important to identify ways in which the context may shift and disrupt the food system, such as broader changes in security, governance, or market trends. A cessation of violence, for example, may have positive impacts on the overall food system, the ramifications of which should be broadly understood.

## Develop Multi-Year Strategies to Reinforce and Build Resilience Capacities

Emergency food security programs are, by nature, short-term. Because of the fluidity of conflict-driven crises, donors are often reluctant to fund programs longer than one year – if not less. The rapid nature of humanitarian response means that teams are under pressure to move quickly, constantly racing through

program start-up, implementation, close-out and then repeating the same cycle again and again in rapid succession. It is no wonder that common emergency food security program activities are replicated from crisis to crisis, year to year. Even as crises become protracted, few changes are seen in program designs.

Developing multi-year strategies based on system and risk analysis is one way to shift food security programming in conflict-driven, protracted crises from relying solely on stop-gap measures and to provide guidance for shorter-term programs that are often renewed for many years. This reflects the changing nature of conflict, where today's conflicts rarely have a clear start or end point, but rather they become locked into ongoing cycles of violence and instability years and sometimes decades. Ultimately, these strategies should outline a menu of interventions that can be layered to help build the capacity of people, households, communities and systems to meet urgent needs, avoid backsliding, prevent crisis escalation, and transform drivers to maintain food security within volatile conflict-driven crises (see Figure 4 for an example framework).

### SOUTH SUDAN STRATEGY PILOT

*In 2019, Mercy Corps engaged in a multi-phased strategy process in South Sudan to articulate a path to resilient food security. Drawing from Mercy Corps' resilience, market systems and peacebuilding strategy development processes, the workshops used systems mapping and shock overlays similar to our [Strategic Resilience Assessment](#) process to identify resilience capacities to build food security. After, example activities were articulated, building on market systems and conflict analysis to identify potential intervention leverage points.*



Figure 4: Example Multi-Year Strategy Capacity Framework

To do so, strategies must go beyond identifying and addressing the specific factors that are driving the food security crisis at the moment by also understanding the potential future scenarios under which food security may be impacted (as noted in the prior section). This includes potential changes in conflict-related trends as well as other shocks and stresses that may arise in the coming months and years. Specific intervention options to build these capacities should reflect what may be possible under different scenarios. There may be several different options, for example, to meet urgent needs for food access that acknowledge different

market and conflict dynamics that influence modality choice. The strategy should also note any specific contextual barriers from building more transformative capacities so they may be monitored carefully.

## Pivot based on Evolving Crisis Dynamics & Program Results

Food security programs in protracted, conflict-driven crises *must* be accompanied by quality monitoring and learning systems that facilitate adaptation to a constantly shifting context and make use of any scenario planning within multi-year strategies. This includes not just monitoring program outputs and outcomes, but also monitoring market, conflict and social dynamics that could, for example, support a shift in modality approaches within programs or even trigger investment in more sustainable or even transformative interventions.

Continuous analysis of the program's impact and the context can help identify windows of opportunity where more sustainable intervention options may be possible. For this reason, emergency food security programs *must* invest in robust Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) systems and ensure that both MEL and program teams take responsibility for understanding and reflecting on the collected program *and* context data together. This includes utilizing real-time context monitoring and crisis analytics, especially in fluid situations, to help enable quick adaptations to program implementation. For example, specific barriers to adopting more sustainable program strategies – such as the closure of a specific marketplace or the presence of armed groups in a certain area – may be closely monitored to help identify when a shift in approach may be prudent.

Additionally, because emergency programs are often funded on an annual basis, the timeframe when grants are up for renewal is an opportune moment to reflect on the current program's successes, market and context monitoring data, and any lessons learned that could signal a need for an adjustment in programmatic approaches. Prior to these sessions, updated market, gender, and food security assessments should be conducted or otherwise gathered from external sources (e.g. clusters, working groups and independent monitors) – to help challenge assumptions and redesign a program's approach. Bringing together expertise drawn from programs, MEL, security and/or humanitarian access, and other teams will help bring different perspectives to understanding data and adaptation options. This includes, where applicable, Mercy Corps' Crisis Analysis Teams, who bring deep knowledge of social and political dynamics in humanitarian crises.

Combining regular pause-and-reflect moments between programs and MEL teams – in addition to an annual learning process to inform a program's continuation in protracted crises – will help ensure emergency food security programs are responding to current realities and provide space to build in approaches that address root causes of food insecurity and bolster community capacities to withstand current and future risks that undermine food security.

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Despite decades of progress reducing food insecurity and malnutrition, conflicts around the world have driven more people into food insecurity and malnutrition over the last few years. While humanitarian aid – through the provision of other goods and services that support food access, availability and utilization – can be the difference between life and death for people in conflict-affected contexts, to have sustained impact our interventions must take a more holistic approach to building food security. Applying Mercy Corps' Towards Resilience approach through food systems can help drive better food security outcomes in conflict-driven crises – so long as it is accompanied with better information, analysis, strategy and adaptive-learning.

Traditional humanitarian aid plays an important within this approach, but more can and should be done even in fluid and insecure environments to tackle root causes of food insecurity and build capacities to maintain it throughout volatility without relying on international support.

## CONTACT

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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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