



# RESILIENT FOOD SECURITY IN CONFLICT-DRIVEN CRISES

## Mercy Corps' Capacity Statement

AUGUST 2021

### Background: Food Security and Conflict

Conflict remains a dominant driver of food insecurity around the world. Violent conflict reverses hard-fought gains from decades of development work as the instability interrupts livelihoods, contributing to the impoverishment of conflict-affected communities. It is estimated that two-thirds of the world's poorest people will live in conflict-affected areas by 2030<sup>i</sup>. Conflict can have a devastating impact on a community's food security when markets and supply chains are disrupted, when livestock are killed and fields burned, or when the main producers of food are killed or are engaged in combat. Damage to water and sanitation infrastructure due to warfare can make it more challenging to safely prepare food and greatly impacts nutrition outcomes. Women and girls of childbearing age, adolescents and young children are especially vulnerable to malnutrition during conflicts as it can be even more challenging to maintain proper nutrition when their security is compromised.

Unsurprisingly, conflict drives 80% of all humanitarian need.<sup>ii</sup> Mercy Corps is currently operating food security programming in 19 of the top 30 most fragile states, according to the Fragile States Index,<sup>iii</sup> and has implemented \$800 million on food security interventions in those countries over the last ten years.



# An Approach: Building Resilient Food Security in Crises

Mercy Corps applies a resilience approach to all our programming – even in conflict-driven crises. We recognize that to achieve food security (stable food access, availability, and utilization), resilience is necessary. We strive to understand the relationship between shocks, evolving risk factors, and systemic drivers of food insecurity in conflict contexts and our programs aim to strengthen the capacities conflict-affected people needed to mitigate those risks in both the short and long-term. Mercy Corps analyses these relationships through food system to understand drivers of food insecurity while also identifying leverage points. Frequent analysis and building a rich understanding of the context in which we work is an integral part of our approach to building food security in conflict-driven crises.

Based on that analysis, our food security programs are designed to meet urgent needs but *also* to avoid backsliding and to facilitate more transformative and sustainable change as we aim to improve food security and build resilience even in conflict-driven crises. Our interventions are drawn from an analysis of food systems and are not bound by “humanitarian” or “development” biases; instead, we focus on the capacities communities need to be resiliently food secure. 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 depth of crisis, which often corresponds to the level of stability.



Figure 1: Example spectrum of food security interventions in a conflict-driven crisis

# Approach in Action

## Multi-Year Strategies to Reinforce and Build Resilience

Multi-year strategies to build resilient food security in conflict-driven crises are a cornerstone to Mercy Corps' approach. Such strategies help guide emergency programs that rely on short cycles of funding to keep an eye towards effecting more systemic change while also being responsive to meeting more immediate needs. Mercy Corps food security strategies in protracted conflict-driven crises are adaptive and responsive to the ever-changing nature of such contexts. In addition to prioritizing meeting basic food and nutrition needs to save lives, Mercy Corps is a leader in designing and implementing activities that build the resilience and sustainability of communities in the long term despite conflict-related instability and other shocks and stresses. In recent years, Mercy Corps has engaged in several of strategy processes in these contexts, a few of which are highlighted below.

### Nigeria Strategic Resilience Assessment (2018)

Mercy Corps Nigeria conducted a [Strategic Resilience Assessment \(STRESS\)](#) in northeast Nigeria – one of our first uses of this processes in an unfolding conflict-driven humanitarian crisis. The process was used understand how “the conflict” as an overarching stress impacts people’s livelihoods, social cohesion, and food security, and what it means to build resilience within protracted conflict.

### South Sudan Resilient Food Security Strategy (2019)

Mercy Corps' Food Security Technical Unit 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 STRESS process to identify resilience capacities to build food security. Example activities are articulated, building on market systems and conflict analysis to identify potential intervention leverage points.

### Yemen Cultivating Resilience Strategy (2021)

Mercy Corps' Food Security Technical Unit developed a strategy for food security in Yemen based on Mercy Corps' *Towards Resilience* framework, which identified pathways towards food security that aimed to (1) improve health and nutrition, protect and strengthen livelihoods, and improve WaSH conditions through a series of pathways that reduce harmful coping, prevent the escalation of the food crisis and transform drivers of food insecurity in Yemen.

### Syria Resilient Livelihoods Strategy (2021)

Mercy Corps' Syria team developed a strategy to develop more resilient livelihoods across its implementation areas. The strategy builds on Mercy Corps' signature markets in crisis approach, while advancing approaches that aim use more of a direct-delivery approach in locations that continue to experience conflict as well as more systems and resilience-related efforts in areas that are more stable.

## Multidimensional Food Security Programs

Mercy Corp's emergency food security portfolio include a wide range of activities in different contexts. Below are a handful of examples of such programs in conflict-driven crises that meet urgent needs while also aiming to avoid backsliding and even transform drivers of food insecurity.

## Food Assistance and Building Agricultural Resilience in Northeast Syria

The conflict in Syria severely limited food security and livelihoods opportunities across the country due to 10 years of violent conflict, frequent population movements, and erratic weather patterns. By 2019, nearly half of the population was estimated to be food insecure in Northeast Syria, with families growing deeper in debt, sending children to work or beg, and skipping meals. In response, Mercy Corps' Building Agricultural Resilience & Providing Food Assistance in Northeast Syria program (2019-2021) layered a series of activities to ensure households were able to meet immediate food needs while also investing in the recovery of agricultural livelihoods. To meet the most acute needs, the program distributed in-kind food kits of ready-to-eat items to recently displaced families, accompanied by monthly market-based food assistance to meet food and non-food needs to vulnerable households to avoid further backsliding. To prevent crisis escalation, the program invested in vegetable gardens, wheat production, and small livestock with farmers, and established farmer field schools and a legion of community health workers to increase pest and disease control capacities. Mercy Corps' Post Harvest Survey showed that farmers were able to harvest 1.99t/ha of rainfed wheat (above the 2020 average (1.73t/ha) for the region), and cereal production was 20% greater in 2020 than the year before. Livestock producers also benefited from improved herd health and disease reporting, reporting no distress sales. Overall, program participants saw a marked increase in food security – including a reduction in the use of harmful coping strategies (61% reduction in the reduced coping strategies index) and nearly double the percent households with an “acceptable” level of food consumption according to the Food Consumption Score (from 31% to 61%).



Ezra Millstein for Mercy Corps, Syria

## Meeting Urgent Needs while Building Climate Resilience in Niger

Decades of poor land management practices, warmer weather and more erratic precipitation degraded soils and constrained food production and income generation across Niger's Tillabéri Department. Insecurity and restricted mobility because of violent clashes between armed non-state actors and the military add pressure on an already fragile food system. Mercy Corps' \$4 million Cash Assistance and Resilience to Environmental Shocks (“CARES”, 2019-2021) program aimed to increase immediate food access through cash assistance and reduce vulnerability to environmental shocks and longer-term stresses through land restoration activities. The cash for work projects employed over 4,000 young people from food insecure homes in public works projects to restore degraded communal pastureland, reduce flooding, and improve physical access to markets. This effort hoped to keep young men employed at home, improve household access to basic food needs, and reduce vulnerability to environmental shocks and stresses through the public works projects.



Sean Sheridan for Mercy Corps, Niger

Through cash for work, CARES rehabilitated 1,218 hectares of communal land and built 3,419 m<sup>3</sup> of dry-stone dams to prevent flooding of farmland and markets. CARES also targeted the most vulnerable households - often the elderly or those living with chronic illnesses or disabilities - with unconditional cash transfers to purchase food or other basic needs. Post distribution monitoring showed that between the first cash distribution and the third, the portion of CARES households with a “poor” food consumption score dropped from 29% to 13% of households.

## Supporting Nutrition through Markets and Behavior Change in NE Nigeria



Corrina Robbins for Mercy Corps, Nigeria

Conflict with Boko Haram over more than a decade severely undermined food security in Northeast Nigeria. Nigerians were displaced repeatedly, are unable to farm due to the persistent violence, and their markets are severely disrupted. Widespread food insecurity and malnutrition has followed. Mercy Corps \$15 million fourth phase of the Responsive Economic Assistance to Conflict-Affected Households program (REACH-4, 2020-2021) enabled conflict-affected households in Damboa to meet essential food needs through a multi-pronged approach to increase access to staple and fresh foods through local market actors, while

also shaping behaviors to support optimal nutrition. To meet immediate needs, Mercy Corps distributed electronic value vouchers for staple and fresh foods, giving them the flexibility to choose what food items made sense for their families. The use of harmful coping strategies among households who received vouchers fell substantially during REACH-4 (57% reduction in the reduced Coping Strategies Index), and the percent of households that experienced little to no hunger nearly doubled from 24% at baseline to over 43% at endline. Supporting markets and bolstering food access was a priority to prevent further backsliding; through the vouchers, REACH stabilized small businesses and markets by strengthening the food market-chain. To address an underlying driver of poor nutrition (poor dietary quality and infant and young child feeding practices) REACH deployed social behavioral change activities to foster nutrition-related behavior change through Women's Nutrition Support Groups. The percentage of women of reproductive age (15-49 years) who consume Minimum Dietary Diversity (MDD-W) increased by nearly 24%.

## From Multi-Purpose Cash Transfers to a Social Safety Net in Iraq

Over one million people remained displaced from their homes in Iraq<sup>iv</sup>, yet many have also begun to return to their areas of origin. Returnees face numerous obstacles that prevent recovery: destroyed buildings and infrastructure, weak markets and limited income-generating opportunities, and limited public services. The Cash Consortium for Iraq (CCI) was established in March 2015 with the aim of promoting a more effective multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) response to conflict-affected communities. As the lead organization, Mercy Corps partnered with numerous organizations and donors to provide cash transfers without conditions

restrictions to reduce harmful coping strategies. According to a multi-year study of the program, households that received cash transfers used fewer harmful coping strategies and had higher food consumption scores as compared to control groups. Specifically, program participants saw a 12-point decrease in coping strategies index scores at endline compared to no change among the control group. Families that received cash transfers were also more likely to purchase and own productive assets – such as purchasing livestock or cooking equipment – than control households. Qualitative data suggest that these investments were often



Ezra Millstein for Mercy Corps, Iraq

utilized to restart livelihoods. In addition to the clear positive impact that humanitarian cash has had on Iraqi families and the economy, the CCI collaborated with the World Bank's efforts to establish a federally administered social safety net via Iraq's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. This includes, for example, the CCI's use of Proxy Means Testing to target referrals to the Iraqi government's registry and services, and the joint administration of intake surveys in areas where the federal government has limited reach.<sup>v</sup>

# Monitoring & Adapting Activities in Conflict Contexts

Continuous analysis of an emergency food security program's impact and the context can help identify windows of opportunity where more sustainable intervention options may be possible. Below are signature analysis efforts that Mercy Corps' food security programs in conflict-driven crises utilize.

## Crisis Analytics in Conflict-Driven Crises

Mercy Corps' emergency food security programs benefit from the expertise of six dedicated Crisis Analytics Teams. Globally, these Crisis Analytics Teams include roughly 40 analysts, mapping, visualization officers, and data scientists working to aggregate and analyze data from a variety of sources in conjunction with the expertise of subject matter experts to improve decision-making and access in complex crises. At present, Mercy Corps has Crisis Analytics Teams operating in Syria, Yemen, the DRC, Nigeria, Venezuela, and the Sahel, and is currently expanding to include Afghanistan and Ethiopia. These Crisis Analytics Teams work to gather real-time information from reliable local sources to better understand the nuances of how conflict is experienced in and impacts the contexts where Mercy Corps operates in. Such information is critical for adaptive management of emergency programs, especially those aiming to affect food security outcomes.

## Digitalized and Automated Monitoring in Emergency Programs

Conflict contexts are volatile and ever changing, so rapid data collection and analysis is vital to keeping programming relevant and effective. Unfortunately, poor access to reliable WiFi, safety constraints, time and staff constraints can make it challenging for emergency food security programs engage in regular data collection – particularly in conflict-driven crises. Mercy Corps devised a system of data collection to capture Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM) data either online or offline. When the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) specialist is back to a place with internet connectivity they can sync their data into a web-based cloud. Mercy Corps also utilizes automated PDM to drastically reduce the amount of time that the MEL team spends on data extraction, cleaning, and analysis from 3-5 weeks under manual analysis to 1-2 days using our Microsoft supported automated PDM tool. The automated PDM tool is used in conjunction with visualization tools to visualize key PDM data and other performance indicators. By saving time and manpower, Mercy Corps can spend more time on adaptive management and program refinement. This system has been piloted in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Indonesia for a variety of distributions including cash, vouchers, and basic needs items such as food and water.

## Collaborating, Learning and Adapting Processes for Emergency Programs

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. To help facilitate regular pause-and-reflect moments between programs and MEL teams with an annual learning process to inform a program's continuation in protracted crises, Mercy Corps is investing in USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) framework through its CLA Toolkit Development project to improve program quality through systematic reflection and strategic learning processes for emergency food security programs. The toolkit provides emergency programs with practical step-by-step tools and guidance to plan, resource, facilitate and carry forward evidence-based learning to promote systematic adaptive management and iterative program design. Using the toolkit, humanitarian program staff will be able to design, plan and implement contextually relevant CLA activities, to promote a data-driven culture, support the use of data from routine MEL, real time evaluations, post distribution monitoring, assessments, CARM, and others.

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<sup>i</sup> The World Bank. (2020). *World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020-2025*. [World Bank Group Strategy for Fragility, Conflict, and Violence 2020-2025](#)

<sup>ii</sup> The World Bank. (2021). *Fragility, Conflict & Violence overview*. [Fragility, Conflict and Violence Overview \(worldbank.org\)](#)

<sup>iii</sup> The Fund for Peace. (2021). *The Fragile States Index*. [Global Data | Fragile States Index](#)

<sup>iv</sup> IOM. (2021). Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). <https://dtm.iom.int/iraq>

<sup>v</sup> Mercy Corps (2021). *A Million-Dinar Question: Can Cash Transfers Drive Economic Recovery in Conflict-Driven Crises? Experimental Evidence from Iraq*. [https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/CCI\\_Mixed\\_Methods-Report\\_UK\\_WEB\\_02Aug21.pdf](https://www.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/CCI_Mixed_Methods-Report_UK_WEB_02Aug21.pdf)