An Overview

More than 1 billion people worldwide live in chronic hunger—endangering the health, mental capacity, economic productivity and well-being of people in the world’s poorest nations. The causes of hunger are complex and include low agricultural yields; high food prices; poor nutrition and health status; inequality among community members; natural resources depletion; and humanitarian emergencies. Hunger remains among the world’s top public health challenges, alongside high maternal, newborn and child morbidity and mortality; malnutrition; infectious diseases; and access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Closely linked, poor health reduces productivity, incomes and food security for affected households while poor nutrition status has a similar effect—in fact, poor nutrition among young children causes irreversible, lifelong diminished mental and physical capacity. It is estimated that 900 million rural people in the developing world live on less than $1 a day—and many are smallholder farmers whose low productivity contributes to poverty and food shortages. Natural or man-made crises further exacerbate food insecurity and poor health among communities.

Food security is defined as “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” In keeping with its broad mandate, Mercy Corps currently operates 45 programs focused on food security, worth more than $250 million, in more than 20 countries. Moreover, Mercy Corps’ public health portfolio, active in 12 countries, is worth more than $211 million, while programs with an agricultural development focus are worth a further $186 million in 22 countries.

Our Strategic Goals and Approach

Mercy Corps works to enable communities to meet their own food and nutrition needs by improving food availability, access and utilization, as well as the ability to withstand shocks. Given the integrated, intersectoral nature of food security, Mercy Corps’ team includes technical experts from a wide range of disciplines including production, livelihoods development, market strengthening, public health, nutrition and logistics. An integration of interventions better addresses the interplay of causes of food
insecurity, such as low agricultural productivity, insufficient income and the exacerbating effects of poor health and nutritional status. Addressing any one of these problems at a time is insufficient to sustainably improve food security. Mercy Corps strives to achieve food security through the following interrelated goals and objectives:

- **Food Availability**: Increase food quantities through strengthened agricultural production and improved productivity or food assistance.

- **Food Access**: Increase households’ financial and physical resources to obtain diverse, healthy foods through developing economic activities focused on the most vulnerable, as well as building and renovating productive infrastructure.

- **Food Utilization**: Improve individuals’ adequate health and nutrition behaviors—with a specific focus on pregnant and lactating women and children under age 5—through increased knowledge of nutrition and care seeking; adapted and responsive health services; and increased access to potable water and sanitation.

- **Stability**: Strengthen the capacity of individuals, households or communities to cope with and withstand shocks affecting economic, social, health and governance conditions or the natural resource base.

- **Empower Communities**: Mercy Corps empowers individuals and communities by raising awareness on key food and nutrition security-related issues and creating demand for the availability of quality services. This is done through carefully designed Behavior Change Communication campaigns focusing on advocacy, communication and community mobilization.

- **Gender Mainstreaming**: Men, women, boys, and girls experience food and nutrition insecurity differently. In many cultures, women play a significant role in household food security, with responsibility for food preparation and child care in addition to providing agricultural labor. Our programming is rooted in context-specific analyses to understand the connections between gender and food security.

### Intervention Areas

**Increasing Productivity and Building Competitive Agri-Food Chains**: Improving yields and diversifying production leads to higher incomes and improved food security. As a component of local economic growth and employment creation, Mercy Corps develops agricultural markets by increasing farmer productivity; building a base of local agro-enterprises (e.g., storage or processing); strengthening producer associations for economies of scale; ensuring access to basic services (e.g., inputs, capital or insurance); and working with relevant private, public and civic sector parties to create an enabling business environment for sustainable growth.

**Public Health and Nutrition**: Mercy Corps implements context sensitive and integrated public health programs by strengthening local health systems and promoting healthy behaviors and practices—all of which translate into sustainable change for individuals and communities. Mercy Corps focuses on five specific technical areas of intervention: maternal, newborn and child health; nutrition; infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria; access to safe drinking water and sanitation; and psychosocial support.
Land and Water Resource Management: Mercy Corps works with communities who are dependent on natural resources for their economic vitality, such as farmers, pastoralists and fishermen, to reverse the trend of poor land and water resource management. Better management improves communities’ ability to maintain productivity and profitability and to decrease the possibility for future conflict related to land and water access.

Emergency Response and Recovery: Mercy Corps emphasizes market-friendly responses that meet immediate humanitarian needs; protect livelihoods and health/nutritional status; and transition quickly to recovery. Initial assessments determine whether transfers such as food assistance, cash or vouchers are necessary to prevent suffering and protect development gains; and if so, how such aid can be delivered efficiently and effectively without destabilizing local markets. Mercy Corps acts immediately to rebuild livelihoods by rehabilitating economic infrastructure; providing grants or loans; and, at times, providing basic inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and tools to jumpstart production and business activity across respective value chains. In a disaster situation, Mercy Corps may be one of the only actors present to monitor and ensure early detection of a deteriorating situation, such as declining health and nutrition status among the most vulnerable.

The Approach In Action

In Uganda, the Healthy Practices, Strong Communities Program is a five-year program funded by USAID/Food for Peace through multi-year assistance program (MYAP) funding. Active since 2008, the program integrates activities targeting agricultural production, maternal and child health, and water and sanitation to achieve greater food security for more than 500,000 people in northern Uganda. As of 2011, the program has increased household food stocks by 11 percent; increased the dietary diversity of program participants by 10 percent; and decreased the number of underweight children by 7 percent.

In Kenya, the Relief and Recovery for Kenya’s Northern Drought-affected populations and Livestock Economy program funded by the Gates Foundation is meeting the immediate, humanitarian needs of communities severely affected by drought in 2011, while simultaneously building resiliency to future emergencies. The program is protecting food security for 60,000 drought-affected pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. By working with local traders to provide emergency food vouchers to affected households, the program allows them to access food and increase dietary diversity. Livelihoods are protected through animal feed voucher distribution as well as livestock destocking. Longer term resiliency will be enhanced by helping households rebuild livestock herds and maintain their health.

The Global Food Crisis Response was designed in response to the 2007–08 global food crisis. Operating in five countries—Central African Republic (CAR), Nepal, Niger, Somalia, and Sri Lanka—and funded by the Gates Foundation, cash transfers helped 76,194 beneficiaries begin the recovery process. Project beneficiaries used these transfers to address both the immediate needs of food, clothing, health care, housing, and other necessities during seasons of food insecurity, as well as leverage longer-term investments to guard against future vulnerability. In parallel, the project increased smallholder income through improved productivity/sales and access to appropriate financial services. Assisted value chains include poultry in Niger, rice in Sri Lanka, vegetables in CAR, ginger and potatoes in Nepal, and a food basket in Somalia, resulting in 92 percent increase in yearly economic returns among participating farmers.

Programa Comunitario Materno Infantil de Diversificación Alimentaria is funded by USAID/Food for Peace. It is an innovative, five-year health and nutrition program in four municipalities in Alta Verapaz,
a state with some of the highest poverty rates in Guatemala. The program employs a new approach to nutrition programming: preventing malnutrition in pregnant mothers and very young children before it starts. PROCOMIDA provides critical nutrition and health services to pregnant and lactating mothers and children under the age 2 in partnership with the Ministry of Health and local organizations. By strengthening national health systems and incorporating behavior change communication, PROCOMIDA is creating demand and supply for much needed health and nutrition services in the communities in which it works.

Key Partnerships

The TOPS Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network is an open community of practice of food security and nutrition implementers seeking to create opportunities to share information; shape agendas; understand and influence donor priorities; build consensus on promising practices; and widely diffuse technical knowledge. TOPS is a Leader with Associates led by Save the Children with Mercy Corps, Food for the Hungry, TANGO international and the Core Group as sub-grantees. For more information, see www.foodsecuritynetwork.org.

Local/Regional Purchase Learning Alliance: Through Local/Regional Purchase (LRP), implementers can choose among a variety of transfer types—food assistance, cash or vouchers—to determine which will be quickest, most effective and most appropriate to market conditions. Mercy Corps is a leader in U.S. government-funded LRP programming, having implemented nine as of the end of 2011, and is a founding member of the LRP Learning Alliance, a collaboration among Cornell University, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Mercy Corps, Land O’Lakes, and World Vision. The purpose is to coordinate monitoring of price data, as well as collaborating to analyse results and gather lessons learned.

CORE Group is a community of practice of more than 50 member organizations and networks of partner health professionals whose mission is to generate collaborative action and learning to improve and expand community-focused public health practices for underserved populations around the world. CORE Group provides particular emphasis to women of reproductive age and children under age 5 as they are the most vulnerable to death and illness from poverty and disease.

1,000 Days is an advocacy hub that champions new investment and partnerships to improve nutrition during the critical 1,000 days between a woman’s pregnancy and a child’s 2nd birthday. The right nutrition during this 1,000-day window can have a profound impact on a child’s ability to grow, learn and rise out of poverty. It can also shape a society’s long-term health, stability and prosperity. 1,000 Days engages the private sector, civil society, and government in the U.S. in efforts to improve maternal and young child nutrition throughout the world.

Contact

Penelope Anderson
Director, Food, Health and Nutrition TSU
panderson@dc.mercycorps.org