



# RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEMS

*Making Food Systems Work in The World's Most Fragile Places*

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## Introduction

Today, roughly 155 million people are experiencing acute food insecurity across 55 countries, an increase of around 20 million from 2019. This rise is being driven primarily by conflict and fueled by the climate crisis and the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

The world has an opportunity to dramatically advance the fight against food insecurity and hunger at the UN Food Systems Summit. On September 23rd, the Summit will bring together governments, donors, businesses, and members of civil society from around the world to “transform the way the world produces, consumes and thinks about food.”<sup>2</sup> The Summit marks a breakthrough moment in the world’s approach to hunger. It is designed not simply to look at individual interventions to meet needs, but to rethink how key players from across the public and private sectors can strengthen whole food systems<sup>3</sup> so that everyone can access enough affordable, nutritious food.

The challenge, though, is that most hungry people are in fragile and conflict-affected places. In these settings, it is especially difficult to transform food systems and to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized people.

**This document sets out four key ways that governments, donors, private sector partners, and aid organizations can build strong food systems that deliver healthy food for everyone—including those living in the world’s most fragile places. Mercy Corps calls on UN Food Systems Summit stakeholders to:**

- › **Put conflict prevention and good governance at the heart of food systems transformation.**
- › **Invest in climate resilience to tackle food insecurity and the climate drivers of conflict.**
- › **Champion digital innovations that serve food-insecure communities affected by climate change and conflict.**
- › **Promote inclusive markets for nutritious food access and availability.**

## Put conflict prevention and good governance at the heart of food systems transformation.

Conflict disrupts almost every aspect of food systems, from production, harvesting, processing, and transport to input supply, financing, and marketing. Inequitable food systems and food insecurity itself can also contribute to conflict because inter-group grievances, economic exclusion, and competition for limited resources may lead to violence. Agricultural transformation efforts which seek to increase the performance of food systems can themselves be conflict triggers, by prioritizing or benefiting one group over another.

Good governance, meanwhile, is critical for functioning food systems because it enables all aspects of food systems to function effectively for all people. Governance structures determine how inclusively food systems are managed and to

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<sup>1</sup> World Food Programme, *2021 Global Report on Food Crises* (2021), 10.

<sup>2</sup> UN Food Systems Summit, “About the Summit,” [un.org/en/food-systems-summit/about](https://un.org/en/food-systems-summit/about) (accessed September 4, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> “Food systems [...] encompass the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and parts of the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded.” Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Sustainable Food Systems Concept and Framework* (2018), 1.

what extent food systems benefit those most in need, and good governance is vital to secure the stability, security, and regulatory frameworks that functioning food systems require.

### Recommendations for UN Food Systems Summit stakeholders:

Donors should increase investments in, and integration of, peacebuilding, good governance, and social inclusion efforts into all food systems and food security assistance. These investments should focus on addressing root causes of conflict that stem from inequitable food systems, as well as immediate triggers. Specifically:

- Donors should **require that conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm principles** are applied in the analysis, design, and implementation of food security and food systems programming.
- Donors should **ensure that food systems transformation efforts**—including those focused on agricultural production, market systems development, and food trade and distribution—**improve the lives of underserved and marginalized groups**, such as women, youth, and ethnic and religious minorities; **mitigate resource-based conflict**; **support equitable land tenure**; and **strengthen mechanisms to peacefully resolve disputes** inherent in and related to food systems.
- Donors should **layer good governance support** into emergency, early recovery, and development efforts targeting food security.

## Invest in climate resilience to tackle food insecurity and the climate drivers of conflict.

Increasing climate variability and extremes remain key drivers behind the uptick in global hunger and severe food crises. The World Food Programme estimates that by 2050, climate change could increase the risk of food insecurity up to 20%.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, climate change can contribute to the issues that increase the risk of conflict, for example, by increasing competition over resources and livelihoods. Tragically, communities who are already among the most food insecure—often small-scale farmers with limited assets and income security, where production is already threatened—are most at risk of climate-driven resource conflicts that then further threaten their access to food, creating a vicious cycle.

Therefore, it is vital that donors, governments, and aid actors support changes across the food system in fragile settings, both to ensure they are resilient to climate change and to lessen the drivers of conflict. However only 25% of bilateral climate financing and less than 50% of the major multilateral climate financing has targeted the most climate-vulnerable countries.<sup>5</sup> The gap is even more stark in those that are also fragile or conflict-affected.

### Recommendations for UN Food Systems Summit stakeholders:

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<sup>4</sup> World Food Programme, "Climate Action," <https://www.wfp.org/climate-action> (accessed September 4, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> From 2010-2017. See Mercy Corps, "New Research: Climate Finance Fails to Reach Most Vulnerable Nations Facing Climate Chaos," July 28, 2020, <https://www.mercycorps.org/press-room/releases/wealthy-countries-failing-on-climate-chaos>; <https://europe.mercycorps.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/1087-PA-ZFRA-AIWhaiCost-V15c-WEB.pdf>.

- Donors should substantially **increase funding for programs that help female and male farmers and youth** in fragile, conflict-affected contexts to **build more climate resilient farming systems**. This includes nature-based solutions that improve ecosystems services, indigenous crops, and biodiversity to protect the ecological foundations for sustainable production.
- Donors and governments should invest in **creating a business environment that catalyzes climate-resilient solutions**. This includes providing adaptation finance and incentivizing the private sector to invest in scaling up proven climate resilient practices, products, and equipment—enabling transformation across the food system, from production to consumption.
- Donors should **invest in disaster risk reduction planning, including social protection and insurance mechanisms that help communities cope with weather extremes and natural disasters**. These efforts should benefit disadvantaged groups, including women and adolescent girls, and excluded ethnic and religious minorities.

## Champion digital innovations that serve food-insecure communities affected by climate change and conflict.

Technology is a powerful tool to transform food systems that build food security, resilience, and inclusive development. Digital platforms and services in particular have the potential to create more productive, efficient, and climate-smart markets for healthy and nutritious food. Digital inclusion can address farmer challenges related to lack of identity, remote location, volatile markets, and lack of access to productive resources and markets. These tools can help increase productivity, income, and resilience. They can also attract more young people to the sector. Crucially, they can build more equitable services for women in agriculture. Women make up 50% of farmers but receive a much lower proportion of resources: for example, women only receive 10% of the credit available for small businesses.

But right now, data and digital technology does not always serve the people who need it most. The bulk of investment in digital tools and services is still concentrated in high-tech Information and Communications Technology that does not work for smallholders in poor countries. Digital services that serve smallholders and rural agribusinesses are not being brought to scale and too often fail to reach women. Digital and data solutions are only in the earliest stages of addressing the holistic needs of food systems and building resilience across food system participants, particularly the most vulnerable.

Digital services need to be inclusive and help conflict- and climate-affected communities weather risk and participate in the food system. Digital solutions should tackle gaps across the entire food system in order to build resilience. This requires integrated actions taken by all stakeholders at local, national, regional, and global levels and by both public and private actors.

### Recommendations for UN Food Systems Summit stakeholders:

- Donors and technology providers should **invest in digital technologies tailored to the needs of smallholder farmers, rural agribusinesses, and consumers** in low-income countries and places disrupted by conflict and natural disaster. This should include digital platforms and services that help individuals and businesses gain access to the resources they require to adapt to climate change.

- Donors should **fund**, and aid organizations **promote, digital agricultural platforms and services that are gender-inclusive** and which amplify impact for women smallholder farmers across their user journey. This requires building awareness and supporting onboarding among women farmers and encouraging women’s active usage of digital technologies during product design and roll-out.
- Governments and donors should **invest in digital infrastructure**, providing coverage even for the most vulnerable and remote places, and **help scale up digital services** by improving regulatory environments for investment in and use of digital data in agriculture.

## Promote inclusive markets for nutritious food access and availability.

Even in communities experiencing extreme levels of violence and displacement, local market actors are able to supply basic resources, including food. Despite the importance of local market systems, the aid community has historically focused on direct provision of commodities and services to meet the needs of crisis-affected people. This approach has often undermined the functioning of local markets and communities’ ability to cope without aid and hampered the longer-term transition out of crisis.

Strengthening food supply chains, even in conflict settings, is essential not only to improving food security outcomes in the midst of conflict, but also to laying the foundation for long-term recovery and well-being. The increasing use of cash-based assistance is important for supporting basic needs in ways that work through local markets, but it is also necessary to support markets more broadly by going beyond cash.

### Recommendations for UN Food Systems Summit stakeholders:

- In emergency settings, donors should support aid modalities that use markets, such as cash transfers, that can **directly support coping and help keep local markets in the food system afloat** in crises.
- Aid organizations should **provide support to market actors and businesses to support continuity** in the food system that can help people recover during and after crises. Even during crises, large pockets with largely functional food systems will continue to exist and must be strengthened and leveraged to ensure greater reach, impact, and sustainability.
- At the same time, aid organizations should seek opportunities to **partner with businesses and institutions on strengthening food supply chains and promoting resilient growth** through the food system over the long term. This includes supporting **inclusive and conflict-sensitive business opportunities** in fragile contexts, with political economy and conflict analysis integrated into market assessments and design.
- Donors should enable aid organizations to **move away from short-term, project-driven action towards longer-term, flexible, adaptive engagement**. This requires donors to increase the timeframes for program funding in crisis contexts; to increase the flexibility of funding; and to break down silos between humanitarian and development funding pools.

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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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