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AFRICA FOCUS | LEARNING NOTE AND INVESTMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Converging Crises, Fragile Food Systems

July 2026

The Scale of the Crisis

266 MILLION PEOPLE IN ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY GLOBALLY¹

Sub-Saharan Africa's food systems are struggling to nourish millions amid converging crises. An estimated **149 million people** across East Africa, West Africa and the Sahel, and Central and Southern Africa faced acute food and nutrition insecurity in 2025,² with conflict, climate extremes, and economic shocks continuing to drive needs.

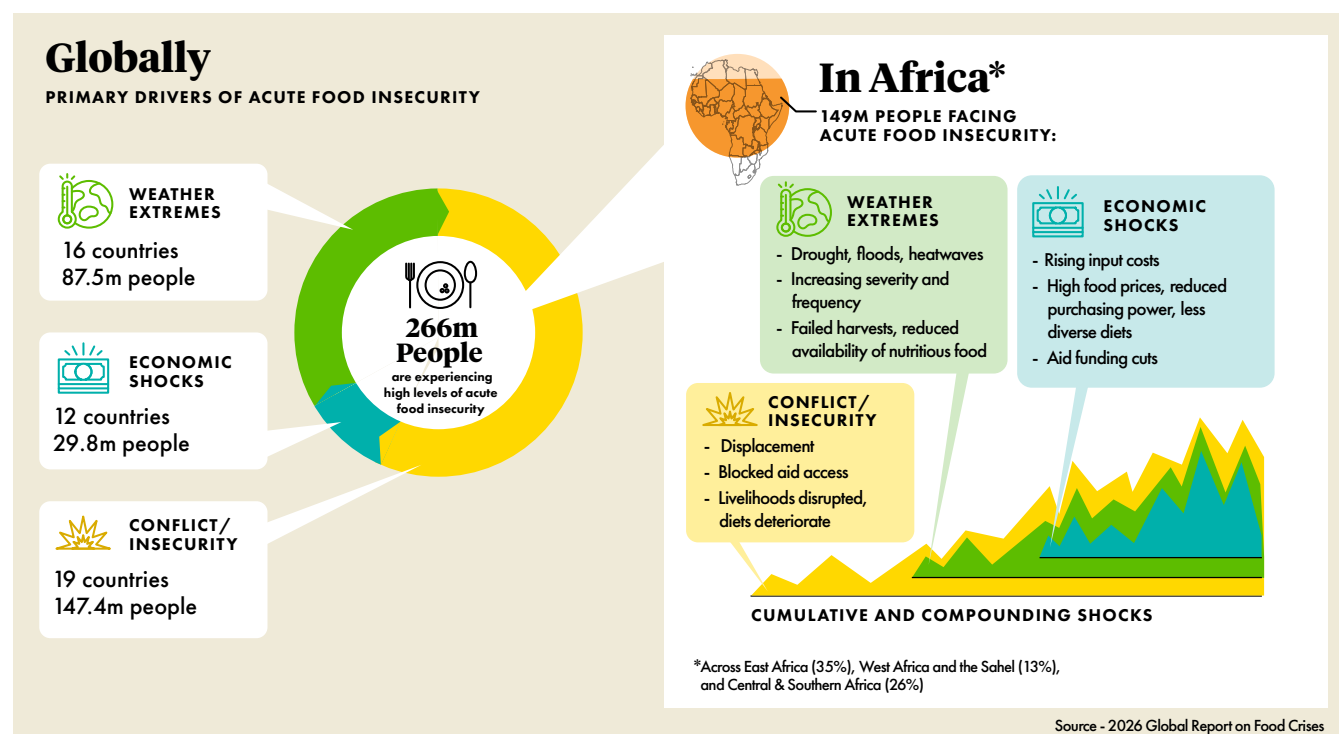


Fig 1. Primary drivers of acute food insecurity and cumulative and compounding shocks

Compounding shocks are translating into rising levels of food insecurity, malnutrition, and displacement across Africa.

	EAST AFRICA	CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICA	WEST AFRICA AND THE SAHEL
NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN HIGH LEVELS OF ACUTE FOOD INSECURITY	45M (35%)	57M (26%)	47M (13%)
NUMBER IN IPC PHASE 4³ (Critical stage of acute food insecurity – Emergency)	11.8M	6.1M	2.3M
NUMBER OF CHILDREN UNDER 5 YEARS OF AGE ACUTELY MALNOURISHED	8.9M children	5M children	12.5M children
NUMBER OF PEOPLE FORCIBLY DISPLACED	19.4M	7.3M	8.6M

Table 1 – Key data on acute food insecurity 2025. Source: [2026 Global Report on Food Crises – Joint analysis for better decisions](#). Highlighted boxes note the most severe region by data type. To note: this is likely an underestimate of reality – 18 additional countries (globally) were unable to provide data, including Burkina Faso, Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia.

1 FAO, WFP & GNAFC. 2026. [Global Report on Food Crises – Joint analysis for better decisions](#). Rome, FAO & WFP.

2 Ibid

3 **IPC Phase 4** represents a critical stage of acute food insecurity. Households in this phase face large food consumption gaps and/or extremely high levels of acute malnutrition, often resulting in life-threatening conditions if immediate assistance is not provided.

Hunger and malnutrition are not driven by a single shock. They are the result of poorly functioning food systems⁴ further weakened by multiple overlapping crises. Conflict (both within the region and globally, including the Iran war), climate extremes (La Niña and El Niño), economic shocks and health emergencies (Ebola), combined with declining humanitarian and development assistance, are converging into a growing “polycrisis.”



Conflict remains the single largest driver of hunger globally, and recent geopolitical tensions are intensifying its effects — disrupting trade, driving up food and fuel prices,⁵ and compounding pressure on already strained food systems. The war in Iran and associated shipping disruptions are constraining fertilizer supply and raising prices, with acute effects in places like Sudan, where conflict has weakened the currency and pushed up import costs. Higher fuel prices are making irrigation and food transport more expensive, while supply chain disruptions leave staple and nutrient-dense foods scarcer — especially in import-dependent countries. These pressures expose the structural fragility of food systems across Africa: heavily reliant on imported inputs like fuel and fertilizer, they are acutely sensitive to global shocks that drive inflation and erode household purchasing power.

“The recent escalation of conflict in the Middle East is disrupting trade routes, driving up food and fuel prices, and destabilizing populations, potentially exacerbating hunger.”

— **Antonio Guterres**,
Secretary General of the
United Nations



Climate extremes are the second major driver of food and nutrition insecurity. A stronger than usual El Niño is expected soon, bringing a potentially dangerous combination of drought and flooding that could disrupt planting seasons, placing further strain on agriculture dependent livelihoods, and undermine access to affordable, nutritious diets.⁶ This new shock comes on the heels of La Niña-induced severe dry conditions during the October-December 2025 Deyr rains, when above-average temperatures and rainfall deficits exceeding 40% hit Somalia and eastern Kenya⁷ — compounding already critical conditions. El Niño is predicted to bring warmer conditions and drought to West Africa and the Sahel, impacting agriculture during the rainy season.

4 A **food system** encompasses all of the interactions and processes related to food production and consumption - from farm to mouth. It includes how food is produced, harvested, processed, distributed, consumed and disposed; the many 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.

5 [The Long Reach of War](#). The Middle East Conflict's Economic Impact on Fragile Contexts. Mercy Corps. 2026. See case studies on Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia. See also [From Hormuz to the Frontline of Hunger](#). Mercy Corps. 2026.

6 [El Niño is coming for agriculture. Here is where the risks are highest](#). FAO. June 2026. See also [Potentially historic El Niño to come, analysis shows humanitarian toll - Joint Research Centre](#) June 2026, [From forecast to risk: an anticipatory analysis of the 2026-27 El Niño](#) and [Inform Warning](#).

7 EC-JRC. 2025. Delayed start of the agricultural season in parts of Southern and North Africa and in the Middle East; drought in parts of the Horn of Africa. 3 December 2025. In: Joint Research Centre. [Delayed start of the agricultural season in parts of Southern and North Africa and in the Middle East; drought in parts of the Horn of Africa - Joint Research Centre - European Commission](#)



Economic shocks continue to deepen food and nutrition insecurity across Africa. Currency depreciation, inflation and high food prices are reducing household purchasing power, while rising costs for fuel, fertilizer and agricultural inputs — felt especially across the region's largely import-dependent markets — are increasing production costs and constraining food availability. In many countries, stagnant incomes mean that even where food is available, vulnerable households cannot afford sufficient or nutritious diets.



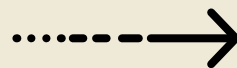
Health crises are intensifying food and nutrition insecurity. The Ebola outbreak declared in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in May 2026, which has affected Uganda and poses risks to neighboring countries, is concentrated among displaced populations already facing severe hunger and malnutrition. Health emergencies disrupt entire food systems by reducing labor availability, limiting mobility, and interrupting markets. The result is a rapid decline in incomes, livelihoods, and food access. Health shocks do not remain isolated; they quickly cascade into food and nutrition crises.



Underlying fragility is turning shocks into sustained crises. Across the region, entrenched poverty, weak food systems,⁸ political instability, and climate vulnerability leave millions permanently on the edge of hunger—even in stable periods. As shocks overlap, their impacts are amplified. Coping mechanisms erode. Livelihoods collapse. Markets fail. Diets deteriorate. Hunger and malnutrition become chronic. This creates a vicious cycle: each new crisis deepens the last, pushing communities further beyond recovery and locking them into prolonged food insecurity—even after the immediate shock has passed.



Humanitarian aid alone is not enough. Emergency assistance saves lives, but it cannot by itself address the underlying drivers of recurring food crises. As needs continue to rise and humanitarian budgets come under increasing pressure, a response system focused primarily on emergency aid risks becoming increasingly costly while delivering diminishing returns. Meeting urgent needs today must be matched by investments that strengthen food systems, build resilience, and reduce vulnerability to future shocks.



THIS IS NOT A TEMPORARY CRISIS

This is no longer a cycle of shocks. It is a system under strain. What we are seeing in Africa is not temporary: it is chronic, complex, and systemic. Food crises are being driven by deep structural weaknesses, with each new shock—from conflict to climate to geopolitics—amplifying the last. **Without strengthening underlying food systems, each crisis will hit harder than the one before,** locking communities into prolonged and recurring hunger.

⁸ Food systems that are highly dependent on imports - both for production (fertilizer) but also to sustain consumption.

What Works

LESSONS FROM FOOD CRISIS RESPONSE EXPERIENCE

Food crises in Africa are multi-dimensional; so, too, are the solutions. Lessons from Mercy Corps' response to complex crises, including severe drought in the Horn of Africa (2022), COVID-19, and the Ukraine war, point to a clear conclusion: effective responses must go beyond short-term relief to strengthen food systems through shifts towards sustainable, climate resilient production, more connected markets, and building demand for nutritious and locally preferred local food varieties. This should go hand in hand with building long-term resilience of households and food systems to deliver sustained improvements in food and nutrition security. The following section summarizes lessons learned (predominantly from Mercy Corps programs) that inform our current practice.

› **Context drives outcomes; food crisis responses must be flexible and adaptive**

Understanding the local context is critical, and generating impact requires programs to continuously adapt as risks, incentives, and opportunities evolve. Evidence from South Sudan shows that limited income opportunities among young people drove cattle raiding, fueling intra- and inter-communal conflict. While many programs supported agriculture and livestock recovery, youth livelihoods, and ex-combatant reintegration, few adapted their approaches to address the interaction between economic marginalization and conflict dynamics, undermining their effectiveness.⁹ Continuous context analysis can also help identify emerging opportunities created by changing market conditions. In Sudan, rising fuel prices following the 2023 conflict increased demand for solar-powered solutions for irrigation and businesses, creating opportunities to strengthen climate-resilient food production and processing. As conflict dynamics, market incentives, and climate risks evolve, programs must remain flexible and responsive. By adapting investments to changing conditions, programs can support both immediate recovery and longer-term food systems transformation. Long-term agricultural investment requires sustained commitments to land, assets, and labour, alongside efforts to rebuild social trust, strengthen economic opportunities, and support communities to adapt. Without addressing these underlying constraints, countries will struggle to transform food systems and reduce reliance on imports.

Flexible, adaptive programming — grounded in continuous context-specific analysis — is essential to transition food systems in complex crisis settings.¹⁰

⁹ [Livelihoods and markets in protracted conflict: a review of evidence and practice](#). Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises. 2021.

¹⁰ See also [Systems change as a route to resilience](#). Mercy Corps. 2026

> Reduce hunger while influencing consumer demand to improve short and long-term nutrition outcomes

Programs which can offer multiple benefits to communities improve outcomes faster. Through the Responsive Economic Assistance to Conflict Affected Households (REACH-4)¹¹ program in Borno State, Nigeria, Mercy Corps offered unconditional food vouchers (reaching 13,436 households) while also offering a targeted additional e-wallet for households with children under 5 and/or pregnant women. The participants were able to purchase vegetables, fruit and animal proteins helping households maintain dietary adequacy during crisis. The program also promoted poultry production and kitchen gardening as well as community engagement to support improved nutrition practices and diet quality. This experience shows how pairing assistance with behavioral nudges creates incentives to shift local food preferences and production practices towards greater nutrition, while also supporting incomes and ecological health.

Offer a range of solutions at one time — such as pairing Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) with behavioral nudges that support nutritious food systems now and for the future.

> Effective crisis response depends on markets strengthened before, during and after crises

Effective crisis response does not have to bypass markets; it can strengthen them while meeting immediate needs, creating a bridge between humanitarian action and food systems transformation. For example, during the 2022-2023 drought in Ethiopia's Somali Region, Mercy Corps subsidized local traders to purchase weakened livestock that would otherwise have been lost. A USD \$122,000 investment enabled traders to purchase 23,500 animals and generated USD \$1.2M in household income, while preserving market functioning and reducing negative coping strategies. Complimentary vouchers for fodder and veterinary medicines further strengthened input supply chains for livestock producers that built resilience and lasted post-crisis. In relatively more stable parts of Sudan, Mercy Corps worked with five seed suppliers to quickly identify seed stocks, move them to regional hubs, and engage local agents to transport seeds across conflict lines, thus supporting both agriculture and a critical market to continue despite the conflict.¹²

Leveraging markets during crisis delivers both immediate relief and lays the foundation for resilient food systems.

However, these approaches depend on market infrastructure and relationships that can be established before crises occur. Through the Regional Livestock Program in the Horn of Africa, Mercy Corps helped build and develop networks between Community Animal Health Workers (CAHW) and private veterinary pharmacies (PVP) to provide last mile animal health services. During the 2025 Somaliland drought, these networks enabled Mercy

¹¹ [Responsive Economic Assistance to Conflict Affected Households](#), Providing food security for the most vulnerable in Damboa, Borno State. 2021.

¹² [Transforming Seed Systems in Fragile Contexts](#). Mercy Corps. 2025.

Corps to deliver an effective voucher response through PVPs. Building providers' capacity, supply chains, and market relationships during non-crisis periods is therefore essential to ensuring crisis response can leverage markets when shocks occur.

Investing in market systems and private sector partnerships delivers strong returns and lasting resilience

Well-designed systems interventions generate significant development impacts while offering strong value for money (VfM). For example, the InovAgro program in Mozambique delivered USD \$6.6M in additional income for 37,800 participants, achieving a benefit–cost ratio of 2.64.¹³ Private sector partnerships can also strengthen local food systems—even in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. In more stable parts of Sudan, Mercy Corps' THABAT program¹⁴ supported 87 agri-MSMEs with USD \$8.27M in grants, leveraging an additional USD \$3.68M in private investment. This helped stimulate local food production, meet immediate food needs, and build a more resilient local food economy less dependent on imports. Similarly, Collective Sudan (formerly the Cash Consortium for Sudan) integrated emergency business grants for market vendors into CVA programs to support critical local markets. These grants were used as business capital, reinforcing market infrastructure, enabling vendors to continue operating, and ensuring households could continue to access food, medicine, fuel, and other essentials.

Even in crisis settings, markets remain central to survival and recovery, and investing in systems-based approaches is not only impactful— it is also cost-effective.

Gender-smart approaches improve outcomes

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by food crises through increased unpaid labor, reduced access to productive assets, finance and markets, and heightened exposure to gender-based violence. At the same time, they play a critical role in food systems—as producers, processors, entrepreneurs and decision-makers who influence household nutrition outcomes. Evidence shows that smart targeting delivers results. In South Sudan, the Strengthening Resilience in Agriculture, Livelihoods and Markets program found that targeted female farmers achieved equal or higher productivity (70% vs. 64% for men) and cash earnings. In Nigeria, programs had to adapt to reach young women (18–29) facing compounding barriers related to marriage, childcare, and social norms.

Gender-sensitive strategies are essential to unlock women's full economic potential in strengthening local food systems.

¹³ [Mozambique - Innovation for Agribusiness \(InovAgro\)](#)

¹⁴ [World Bank Project Information Document - Sudan Enhancing Community Resilience Project, 2025](#)

Financial access is critical but often collapses in crises

Poor and marginalized populations, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas, are often excluded from formal financial services and face significant barriers to access. During shocks, households rapidly lose savings while financial providers reduce or withdraw lending due to heightened risk, cutting off access to capital when it is needed most. This leaves vulnerable farmers, micro-entrepreneurs, and savings groups unable to restart livelihoods or stabilize incomes, increasing the risk of falling into extreme poverty.

Risk-tolerant, locally delivered financial solutions are essential to enable coping in crisis and transition to more resilient local food economies.

Targeted financial solutions can bridge this gap. The Agriculture and Climate Risk Enterprise (ACRE) bundles index-based microinsurance with agricultural credit and farm inputs. Its automated payout process eliminated administrative costs and gave farmers immediate liquidity during a food crisis. Rather than selling off valuable livestock or skipping meals to survive, farmers used the fast mobile cash payouts to buy drought-resistant seeds and try again in the next planting cycle.¹⁵

¹⁵ [Scaling up index insurance for smallholder farmers: Recent evidence and insights](#)

Credit: Mercy Corps / Ezra Millstein / Ethiopia / 2023



What needs to happen now

DELIVERING IMMEDIATE RESPONSE AND BUILDING RESILIENT FOOD SYSTEMS

Humanitarian response remains essential, but donors must recognize that it is not enough on its own. Addressing today's food crises requires simultaneously meeting urgent needs while investing in resilient food systems that can withstand future shocks. This means investment in a continuum of action that includes anticipatory measures before shocks occur, emergency response during crises, and longer-term investments that build resilient food systems.

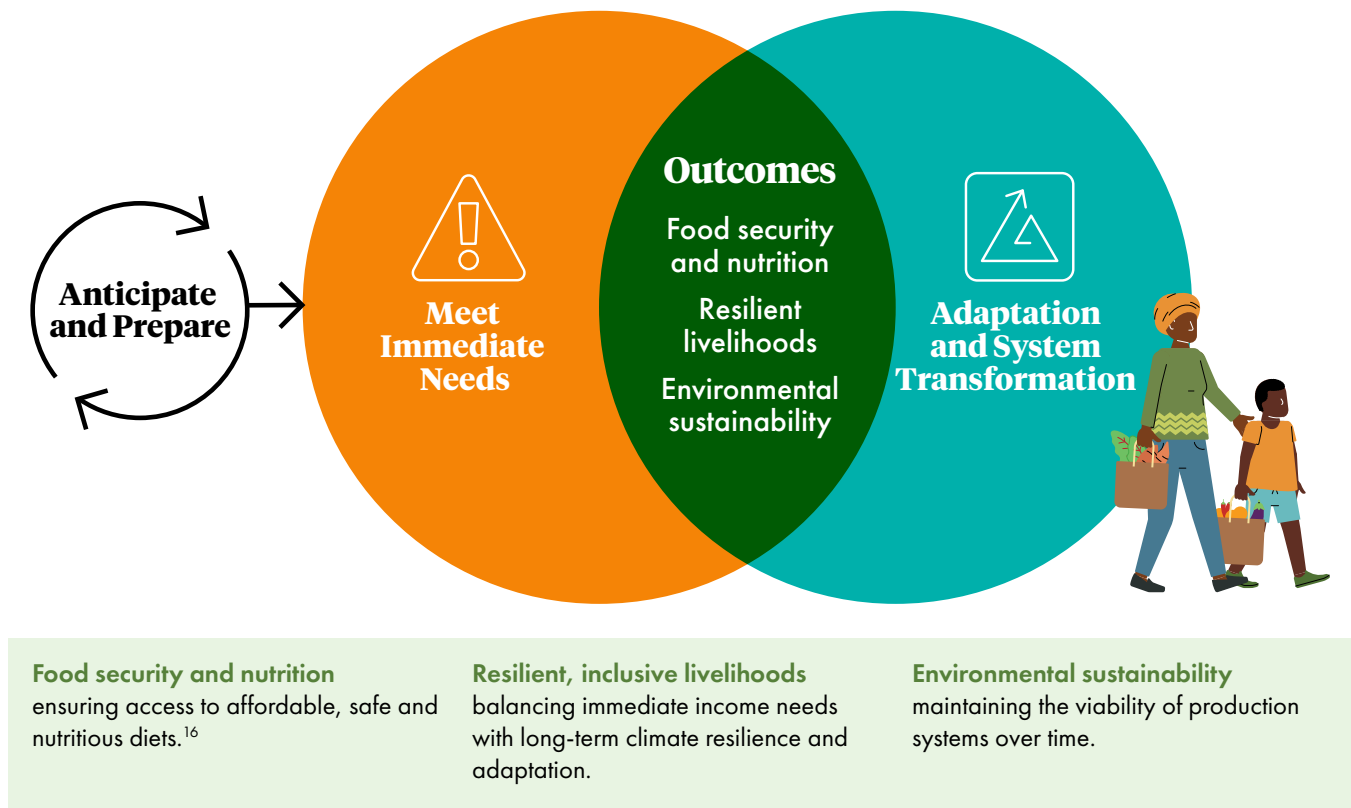
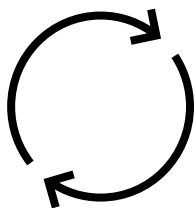


Fig 2. Continuum of action: anticipate and prepare; meet immediate needs; build food system adaptation and transformation

A food systems approach¹⁷ recognizes that affordable, nutritious diets, markets, environment, and social systems are interconnected. When viewed as a continuum of action, it expands beyond short-term responses to address the structural drivers of vulnerability — while still delivering life-saving support when it's needed. Critically, it also creates opportunities to act before crises escalate, reducing humanitarian needs and protecting development gains through anticipatory action.

¹⁶ Availability, Access, Utilization, Stability, Agency and Sustainability

¹⁷ A food systems approach is a way of thinking and acting that considers the food systems as a whole- recognizing the complexity and interconnectedness of all elements, actors and the broader drivers of change. It expands the framing and analysis of food insecurity, malnutrition, environmental degradation and social exclusion and aims to deliver multiple outcomes.



Anticipate and Prepare

Acting before crises hit can protect lives and livelihoods.

We cannot wait for the next shock to respond. Donors and development actors must use early warning systems, climate data, and market signals to anticipate risk and act in advance. This means investing in contingency planning, risk reduction measures, and shock-responsive systems into programs: for example, anticipating fertilizer shortages and investing in local alternatives such as biofertilizer systems.

Shock-responsive social protection systems should be strengthened in advance so they can scale rapidly when crises hit, protecting household purchasing power and supporting local markets. Anticipatory actions such as early cash transfers, livestock vaccination, and investments in food and water storage can help communities protect lives and livelihoods before shocks occur, significantly reducing the severity and cost of crisis.

When shocks do occur, responses should move quickly beyond emergency relief to support adaptation, recovery, and longer-term food systems transformation. Anticipatory action can also create incentives for households to shift production to consumption patterns in ways that strengthen resilience and help food systems withstand future shocks.

WHAT IT MEANS: INVESTING BEFORE CRISIS STRIKES

Donors should invest in systems that enable communities and institutions to anticipate, absorb, and respond to shocks before they escalate into humanitarian emergencies.

- Strengthening early warning systems that combine climate, market and food security data to trigger timely action.
- Expanding shock-responsive social protection programs that can rapidly scale during crises and protect household purchasing power.
- Supporting anticipatory cash transfers, livestock vaccination campaigns (through market-based mechanisms where possible), and pre-positioning of critical inputs before predictable shocks occur.
- Investing in disaster risk reduction measures that help farmers and local businesses withstand droughts, floods, disease outbreaks, and market disruptions.
- Prioritizing vulnerable populations (including women, displaced populations, youth, and marginalized communities) to ensure preparedness investments reduce future inequalities.
- Use anticipatory action to deliver early cash, food, and livelihood support before predicted shocks escalate into humanitarian emergencies.



Meet Immediate Needs and Protect Livelihoods (Cope)

When crises occur, immediate humanitarian assistance remains essential.

Deliver effective emergency response. When crises strike, life-saving support—food, water, and cash—must reach the most vulnerable quickly.

Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA) can reach hungry people in crisis more quickly than commodity support in the short-term. Cash and vouchers preserve local market activity and even stimulate local production or shift consumer behavior, laying the groundwork for improved food systems for the future. It also empowers affected populations by enabling families to choose how to meet their immediate needs. Alongside CVA, targeted nutrition support is essential to protect vulnerable groups, particularly children in the first 1,000 days and pregnant and breastfeeding women. This may include specialized nutritious foods, nutrition services, and interventions that help households maintain access to nutritious diets during periods of crisis.

Work with markets, not around them. Market systems are central to how people survive and recover. Even during crises, they rarely collapse entirely.¹⁸ Strengthening markets enables more effective humanitarian response, supports livelihoods, and reduces long-term aid dependency.^{19, 20} Evidence shows that households with access to functioning markets experience more stable food security and income outcomes during crises and are better able to sustain recovery.²¹ Poorly designed aid can unintentionally undermine these systems—increasing long-term vulnerability.²²

PROTECTING LIVES, LIVELIHOODS AND MARKETS DURING CRISIS

- Deliver cash and voucher assistance rapidly to enable households to access food, water and essential goods while supporting local market activity.
- Provide targeted nutrition support for vulnerable groups, particularly children under five, pregnant and breastfeeding women, and displaced populations.
- Support traders, agro-dealers and local market vendors with emergency finance or grants to maintain supplies of essential and nutritious foods, and keep markets functioning.
- Protect productive assets through livestock support, animal health services, vaccination campaigns and access to feed and water.
- Strengthen community savings groups and social protection mechanisms that can scale quickly during crises and help households avoid negative coping strategies.

¹⁸ [Building resilience through market-based solutions in fragile and conflict affected settings](#). Mercy Corps. Resilience Learning Facility. 2026

¹⁹ [Enhancing Resilience to Severe Drought: What Works?](#), 2017

²⁰ [Meeting Immediate Needs and Protecting Development Gains](#), 2022

²¹ [The Wages of War](#), Mercy Corps. 2018

²² [Livelihoods and markets in protracted conflict: a review of evidence and practice](#), 2021



Adapt and Transform Food Systems

Reducing future humanitarian needs requires investment in the underlying systems that determine how food is produced, processed, distributed and consumed.

Reduce structural vulnerability. Building resilience means tackling the underlying constraints that leave food systems exposed to repeated shocks, including dependence on imported staples and agricultural inputs. Reducing reliance on external inputs, such as synthetic fertilizers, while scaling climate-resilient agricultural practices, is critical. Supporting diversified, nutritious and climate-resilient local crop production can reduce exposure to global disruptions while strengthening local economies. At the same time, wider measures such as reducing food loss and waste, securing land tenure, and strengthening user rights are essential to incentivize long-term investment in land, productivity and sustainable food systems.

Invest in social capital and local systems. Displaced and vulnerable communities often have limited access to land, inputs, markets and social networks. Rebuilding trust, strengthening local institutions and restoring community connections are critical to supporting recovery and resilience. When people have secure access to resources and confidence in the future, they are more likely to invest in their land, livelihoods and sustainable production practices that strengthen food systems over time.

Design locally grounded, context-specific solutions which leverage partnerships across the food system. Collaboration between the private sector, government, and local communities is essential to shaping food systems that meet local needs and create sustainable market opportunities. Interventions rooted in local ecological systems, gender dynamics, markets, and political realities are more effective and deliver stronger value for money. Communities must be at the center for locally-led solutions.

Invest in local food economies. Strategic investment across local food value chains—from production and storage to processing and marketing—and in opportunity crops can deliver co-benefits across nutrition, livelihoods, and climate resilience. Strengthening local food economies also reduces dependence on imports, creates jobs and helps communities retain more value within local markets.

Unlock finance and private sector engagement. Access to finance is a critical enabler of transformation. Public funding should be used to de-risk private investment that advances resilience and development outcomes, particularly through micro, small and medium enterprises operating in fragile contexts. Reforming subsidies and incentives that reinforce unsustainable practices is equally important. Combined with investments in storage, transport and processing systems, these measures can reduce food losses, improve market efficiency, expand market access and catalyze sustainable private sector growth.

Engage key actors for change. Food systems transformation depends on strong partnerships between communities, government and the private sector. Women and youth must be at the center as key drivers of innovation, resilience and long-term change.

WHAT IT MEANS: FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION IN PRACTICE

Build resilient local food production

- Deliver climate-resilient seed systems through local suppliers and voucher-based approaches.
- Support climate-smart agriculture, soil health, irrigation, and diversified farming systems.
- Reduce food loss through improved post-harvest handling and storage.

Strengthen local markets and businesses

- Engage private sector actors early to maintain food supply chains during crises.
- Support agro-dealers, processors, traders, and market vendors through grants, risk-sharing arrangements, and technical assistance.
- Expand market access for smallholder farmers.

Improve access to nutritious diets

- Invest in production, processing and distribution of nutrient-dense foods.
- Reduce barriers to accessing affordable nutritious diets.
- Integrate nutrition objectives into CVA, market systems and resilience programming.
- Strengthen local food environments and consumer demand for nutritious foods.

Expand financial inclusion

- Develop tailored savings, credit, and financing products for farmers, retailers, and agri-enterprises.
- Strengthen connections between financial institutions, savings groups, cooperatives, and community organisations.
- Support products that address barriers faced by women and vulnerable groups.

Put women and youth at the center

- Target women farmers through extension services, producer organizations, and market systems interventions.
- Invest in women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship.
- Embed protection and safeguarding measures across all programming.
- Invest in livelihood and leadership pathways for youth across food value chains, addressing the barriers — limited access to land, finance, market networks, and opportunity — that push young people out of local food economies.

Why invest now?

A BROKEN FUNDING MODEL

The current funding model is not keeping pace with the nature of today's food crises. Food crises are long-term, but funding remains short-term. Long-term strategies with multiyear programs that strengthen food systems are consistently underfunded and among the hardest hit by aid cuts, even as needs rise. Donors are increasingly looking to the private sector to close the gap, yet investment in fragile and crisis-affected contexts remains minimal. The result is a critical mismatch: **the places most in need of sustained investment are the least likely to receive it, leaving food systems trapped in cycles of crisis.**

Why this matters

THE CURRENT APPROACH IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY UNAFFORDABLE

- Humanitarian needs continue to rise while aid budgets decline.
- Repeated emergency responses save lives but do not reduce underlying drivers of vulnerability.
- Each new shock weakens households, communities, markets, and food systems, increasing future response costs.
- Nutrition outcomes deteriorate as crises become more frequent and prolonged – risking generational consequences.²³
- The cost of inaction will continue to grow as climate, conflict, health, and economic shocks intensify.

The choice is not between humanitarian response and resilience. It is whether future crises are met with ever-larger emergency appeals — or with stronger food systems that are better able to absorb, adapt to, and recover from shocks.

Three priorities for donors

1

PREPARE

Invest earlier through anticipatory action, early warning systems, and shock-responsive social protection that reduces the impact of crises before they escalate.

2

PROTECT

Maintain life-saving humanitarian assistance that protects lives, livelihoods, access to nutritious diets, and local markets during crises — helping preserve human capital and reduce negative coping strategies.

3

TRANSFORM

Provide flexible, multi-year financing that strengthens food systems, improves food and nutrition security, creates economic opportunity, and enhances resilience to future shocks.

23 Zenbaba, D., and S. Yaya. 2026. "Breaking the Cycle: Intergenerational Transmission of Stunting in Sub-Saharan Africa—Evidence From 19 Countries." *Maternal & Child Nutrition* 22: e70177.



Credit: Mercy Corps / J. Martin / Uganda / 2022

Conclusions

Africa’s “endless emergency” is not inevitable. Today’s hunger is the predictable result of food systems already under strain — from conflict, weather extremes, economic disruption and health emergencies — where each new shock exposes and deepens the vulnerabilities the last one left behind, trapping millions in recurring cycles of hunger.

Humanitarian assistance remains indispensable: it saves lives, protects livelihoods, and reaches people the moment crisis strikes. But relief alone cannot keep pace with the scale and frequency of today’s shocks, and it was never designed to address the structural weaknesses that leave communities exposed in the first place. That is the gap Mercy Corps’ experience speaks to most directly. Across weather extremes, conflict, and economic crises, the responses that deliver lasting results are those that simultaneously meet urgent needs while strengthening the systems people rely on to produce, access, and afford nutritious food and healthy diets.

With the right investments, food systems can become engines of resilience, economic opportunity, and climate adaptation — improving food and nutrition security today while lowering the cost of crises tomorrow. The choice facing donors is equally clear: continue paying to respond to emergencies as they multiply, or invest now in the systems that can withstand them.

Mercy Corps is committed to working alongside communities, governments, donors, and private sector partners to build the resilient food systems needed to secure Africa’s future.

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Acknowledgements: Mercy Corps would like to thank Olga Petryniak, Lizzy McDonald, Jeeyon Kim, Lindsey Pexton, and Lauren Pincus for their contributions.

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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