

POLICY BRIEF

HOW CAN DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS SUPPORT FOOD SECURITY IN PROTRACTED CRISES?

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Key messages

- **Domestic issues matter more than external factors for food security in many countries at risk of food crises.** This requires a shift of focus away from international commodity price increases and wars, towards domestic factors that determine food prices, such as local food production.
- **There is no one-size-fits-all approach to bolstering the long-term food security of countries.**
- **In protracted crises, households and local communities largely get by through their own ability to cope – rather than depending on outside help, despite commendable efforts by humanitarian agencies.** As such, more effort should be directed towards what allows local economies to function.
- **Despite the hype, there is little evidence that ‘anticipatory action’ funding modalities will be able to play a significant role in preventing or mitigating serious, protracted food crises.** That crises need to be managed by bringing together short- and longer-term instruments is widely recognised, but there is so far little sign that the rhetoric of nexus is bringing this about.



Background

What does meaningful support to bolster food security look like in countries affected by conflict and protracted crises?

This policy brief, developed for the UK's (November) 2023 Global Food Security Summit, summarises insights from recent research from Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises (SPARC) in the Sahel, Syria and Yemen: mostly semi-arid areas subject to protracted crises and conflict, sometimes exacerbated by natural disasters, where food crises and food emergencies threaten.

In most countries, domestic issues are more critical than external factors in determining food prices

For at least the last 40 years it has been understood that food insecurity is not primarily a problem of lack of food: food insecurity exists because some people cannot get hold of enough food, almost always because they do not have the money to buy it. Research by SPARC on food prices, harvests and food imports has examined why people are unable to get enough food: whether there is enough food in the country, the roles of national production and of imports; how specific shocks harm particular people; and how far hunger is a problem of poverty, to be addressed by economic policy and social protection.

Food-insecure countries are often thought to lack domestic harvests of staple foods, leaving them dependent on imports. This, however, is the exception, not the rule. It says more about humanitarian agencies' focus on a few specific countries than about the circumstances of most fragile and conflict-affected lands.

In 2023, SPARC reviewed how investors, donors and policy-makers can strengthen food security in 14 countries at risk of food crises, food emergencies and famine, with deep dives into Ethiopia, Somalia and Yemen,¹ and a separate analysis of rising food prices since 2020 in Mali and Sudan (Wiggins et al., 2023a). SPARC's analysis found that most of these 14 vulnerable countries depend in very large part on domestic harvests for their staple foods. Countries that depend largely on imports for staples are unusual: Somalia and Yemen for wheat and rice; Afghanistan and Sudan for wheat.



Because these four cases capture so much of the attention of humanitarian agencies, the assumption that most food-insecure countries depend on imports is as understandable as it is mistaken.

In most of these vulnerable countries, when there is an increase in the prices of staple foods – the affordability of which largely determines food security for most people – it is because of poor harvests or conflict or a combination of both. Poor harvests arise from variations in the weather, typically drought. For Sudan, (hyper)inflation also contributes.

To reduce vulnerability over the medium term, then, most of these countries need to develop their agriculture, with irrigation and climate-smart agriculture – including water conservation, agroforestry and resilient seeds – at the fore. This may sound challenging, but most of the 14 countries have already increased their agricultural output by more than the growth of population since 2000.

The lesson for aid agencies is that we should worry less about events in distant Europe, and focus instead on what makes people food secure, which is, above all, local harvests and incomes (Wiggins, 2023). Development partners need to: invest in irrigation and in varieties of crops more resilient to ever-more extreme weather; stimulate the non-farm economy to provide additional incomes to rural households; and fund social safety nets for those on very low incomes. And, almost needless to say, anything that will bring peace to people and places in conflict is a paramount need.

¹ This is part of an ongoing package of SPARC work.

Support long-term food security with different solutions

Hunger feels the same wherever you live, but as a quick look at its causes shows (Box 1), that does not mean that there is the same set of answers in each case. The exact nature of how best to support food security depends overwhelmingly on country context.

SPARC's 2023 analysis of the (largely failed) 20 years of aid efforts to 'reconstruct' Afghanistan emphasises the importance of taking context seriously. The report shows that it is not enough just to identify the cause of a problem: you must also understand where this sits within the politics and society of a country to know what to do about it (Levine and Pain, forthcoming 2023). In Afghanistan, the use of intervention models –

borrowed from other countries – to transform the rural economy by developing agricultural markets failed because almost all the assumptions on which they were based were false: assumptions about what poor farmers were trying to do, about how markets worked, about how farmers engage with risk, and about what drives production decisions.

When looking to build the long-term food security of countries, SPARC's individual country studies of Somalia, Yemen and Ethiopia demonstrate how much local context matters, dominating any attempt to identify general patterns.

BOX 1: DIFFERENT INSTRUMENTS TO ADDRESS FOOD SECURITY IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

Somalia

Somalia is unusual for its increasing dependence on imported food, especially for the coastal cities. Yet imported food is relatively expensive, owing variously to: limited port facilities (including small vessels, bagging on board and delays); heavy duties levied on imports by the Federal Government, other authorities and Al Shabaab; poor roads and high transport costs; and a lack of formal finance that prevents importers sourcing from corporate grain traders, thereby paying more for their imports. In this situation, development finance agencies could help finance wharves and handling machinery at ports and offer finance to traders that would allow them to source from formal suppliers. Investments in food processing might reduce import costs.

Yemen

Yemen depends even more heavily than Somalia on food imports, which account for 90% or more of cereals consumed in the country. Domestic production of staples has faltered since the 1990s: available land and water in a largely arid and mountainous country are given over to fruit, vegetables, the stimulant shrub qat and dairy stock. Importing food is also difficult, given the ongoing conflict: imports need to be inspected, some port facilities have been destroyed, roads have been little maintained during conflict, roadblocks are frequent, and levies are extracted when produce passes from one area controlled by opposing forces to another. Despite this, the price of food is remarkably low: wheat flour in Sana'a costs the same as it does in the UK. Moreover, the ratio of local flour prices to the world wheat price has fallen over the last few years, suggesting that private supply chains have become more efficient.

Given this context, the overwhelming priority for Yemen is to secure a lasting political settlement and to invest in roads, ports and education. While those are big asks, there may be possibilities to remove some of the hindrances to food traders, through harmonisation of customs levies, streamlining inspection services and agreeing on fewer roadblocks.

Ethiopia

Since 2000, economic growth in Ethiopia has been strong, lifting incomes and reducing food insecurity. Farm output has risen by more than the growth of population, but not by enough to generate agricultural exports other than traditional exports such as coffee. Since 2020, poor weather in some areas and a major, highly disruptive civil war in the north have stalled farm production: levels of food insecurity have risen in the affected areas. Farming is limited by: variable rains and the ever-greater impacts of a changing climate; lack of credit, insurance, and farm storage; and land tenure that does not allow land to be offered as collateral, hindering credit and investment. In Ethiopia, development finance agencies' efforts would be best directed towards improving financial services to farmers, as well as investing in better port facilities in Djibouti.

Support markets and trade, even in protracted conflict

Protracted crises, usually with intermittent conflict that severely impedes cropping and herding, create conditions in which sustaining lives and livelihoods looks almost hopeless, especially when populations have to abandon their villages to seek refuge from the fighting. But two things must be kept in mind.

First, in protracted crises, the vast majority of people are able, somehow, to survive. Despite humanitarian agencies' large-scale and commendable efforts, individuals, households and local communities largely get by through their own ability to cope – rather than depending on outside help (Wiggins et al., 2023b). Second, in often dauntingly difficult circumstances, farmers and traders get on with their business to a surprising extent. Traders play an often-unrecognised role in making it possible for farmers and herders to earn something from their production, and in making essential goods available to farming and herding households.

This understanding of individuals' resilience should prompt a refocus of what aid is most needed. In protracted crises, outside agencies usually focus their programmes on individuals, households, farms (for example, delivering packages of seeds and tools), and small firms. Much less attention goes to considering what allows local and regional markets and trade to continue. Repairs to roads and bridges, ensuring traders have working capital (which can easily be lost in conflict), and supporting negotiations with warring parties for routes of safe passage for civilian trade, can be critical.

This is not to deny that, in protracted conflicts, some people suffer horribly and deserve social protection. Of course: what to deliver and who to target are key questions. But these matters already get attention. That attention needs to be matched by consideration of what allows local economies to function in conditions of uneasy peace and intermittent violence.

Anticipating food crisis in the Horn of Africa should not mean waiting for a bad weather forecast. Enough is known about the trends of climate change in such regions for action to be taken in anticipation on a longer, more relevant timescale. Investment is needed to develop new economic opportunities and more resilient livelihoods. Some good work is already taking place, but that effort needs to be intensified if food crises are to be averted.



A woman drives a donkey cart loaded with firewood back to the Zorro village, Burkina Faso. Image by Olivier Girard/CIFOR

Recognise the possibilities, but also the limits, of anticipatory action

A more forward-looking perspective is essential to reduce the number and severity of food-security crises. One tool for forward thinking that is gaining increased attention in the humanitarian sector is 'anticipatory action', whereby assistance is triggered before crisis points are reached, when it becomes highly likely that crises may occur. Any hope of preventing crises, though, relies on a realistic appreciation of what can and cannot be achieved by different anticipatory actions and the time horizons that apply.

For example, humanitarians have successfully placed resources ahead of floods to help people cope better. Such action can help them address some of the threats they face (for example, by raising the height of river levees with additional sandbags when a flood is coming downriver), and it can remove some of the constraints that people face when looking for coping strategies (e.g. a cash grant to help them move to look for work) – but it cannot create new economic opportunities for threatened populations. That requires longer-term action, with very different instruments. So far, there is little evidence that anticipatory action can make much difference in long, complicated crises, such as droughts combined with conflicts – what SPARC has called 'wicked crises' – and yet these situations cause the most acute suffering (Levine et al., 2023).

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but that effort needs to be intensified if food crises are to be averted. Expecting anticipatory assistance from humanitarian action to achieve such broader development is hopelessly unrealistic – and unfair on humanitarian agencies and their staff.

Overlap agendas on food security, poverty, resilience and climate change

It should not be controversial to argue that hunger is almost always intimately connected to poverty. But when international aid actors are so tempted to believe that deep, structural crises can be prevented through short-term instruments such as anticipatory humanitarian projects, it is clear that this has been ignored.

An examination of investments that international agencies make to build resilience in the Sahel illustrate the scale – and implications – of this disconnect (Levine, 2022). Humanitarians use the language and metrics of food security. Those aiming to build resilience have their own ways of talking about and measuring vulnerability and resilience that do not correspond to the concepts of food security. To make matters worse, neither of these groups makes any reference to poverty, so their work continues in isolation from so much already learned about how to reduce poverty (which is a lot).

Humanitarians talk about food insecurity, because their responsibility is to deal with direct consequences of acute poverty. Other aid actors, looking through a resilience lens, try to ensure that the benefits of economic opportunities will be sustainable, and are directed at preventing the worst effects of crises.

It should be obvious that ending food insecurity requires a mix of instruments – in addition to improved governance and security, it requires coherence between macro-economic policy, institutional reform, grass-roots transformations to ensure widespread access to opportunities, and social protection for those who need special help. Until actors from different disciplines speak a common language, share common goals and sit round the same table, we can expect to see the same repeated cycles of crisis, grand plans to reduce food insecurity, followed by another crisis, another plan, and so on.

Tackling these long-term drivers of food insecurity is also critical in the context of climate change. Climate change is exacerbating threats faced by people already living in chronically food-insecure situations. These tend to be where the resources and the functioning institutions that are needed to create new opportunities and to support people to adapt are most stretched. In these situations, a simple shock, such as a flood or a drought, can quickly cause a crisis. Climate change specialists should not be at a separate table with a separate language, but are badly needed in the same discussions, using the same language, as those working on poverty, resilience and crisis.

Helping people to cope with increasingly frequent and severe climate hazards is not enough. Coping rarely leads to the changes needed to reduce vulnerability and exposure to future climate extremes. Aid actors need to have long-term strategies that support the long-term preferences of people facing crisis, and to ensure that efforts to help people to meet their short-term needs fit coherently into the long-term plans to build the climate resilience of people: a move from coping with crises to building forward better.

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