



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

# FAO's role in humanitarian contexts

Saving lives through stronger, more resilient livelihoods







©FAO/Patrina Pink

## Overview



**70+ countries**  
in which FAO is implementing  
emergency interventions



**135 million** people  
were acutely hungry in 2019



**60–80%** of severely  
food-insecure people  
worldwide rely on  
agriculture-based livelihoods  
(fishing, crop production,  
livestock rearing, forestry)

**The number of people experiencing hunger – both chronic and acute – has been persistently high in recent years.** The 2019 edition of *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World* indicates that the number of people facing hunger rose to 820 million in 2018, up from 811 million in 2017. According to the *Global Report on Food Crises 2020*, around 135 million people in 55 countries experienced acute hunger in 2019, requiring urgent humanitarian assistance.

**The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has a unique role to play in preventing and addressing acute hunger and supporting countries experiencing food crises to return to a path of growth and prosperity,** given the Organization's mandate to end hunger, long-standing permanent country presence, and substantial expertise and experience in both humanitarian and development contexts.

**Livelihoods are rural people's greatest defence against hunger and malnutrition.** Crises undermine rural livelihoods and erode people's capacity to cope with the next shock. In humanitarian contexts, FAO brings wide-ranging technical expertise and operational experience to the fore to safeguard livelihoods and enable crisis-hit and at-risk people to access and start producing food as quickly as possible.





## What does FAO do in emergencies?

FAO assists people to strengthen their livelihoods to withstand crises, which reduces humanitarian needs and costs by a significant margin.

Protecting livelihoods by providing **emergency agricultural assistance** from the onset of a crisis is **crucial to save lives**, while enabling people to produce food and earn an income. Rapid and efficient response to agricultural threats and emergencies saves lives, promotes recovery and reduces the gap between dependency on food assistance and self-reliance.

### **In humanitarian contexts, FAO:**

- **helps people to anticipate and prepare for crises;**
- **responds fast to crises;**
- **and seeks to reduce risks and address vulnerabilities.**

Even in the most complex, difficult to access contexts, food security and livelihood interventions save lives, safeguard livelihoods and contribute to strengthening resilience in the face of future crises. Investing in local food systems is crucial, providing people with a means to continue surviving even in the midst of disaster. With humanitarian costs soaring, supporting food production before and during crises is a cost-effective means to rapidly increase and sustain food availability, while protecting the agriculture-based livelihoods on which the majority of crisis-hit people rely.

# FAO's interventions



## Boost local food production and enhance nutrition

local production of quality seeds | cereal, pulse and vegetable seeds | farming tools and fertilizers | beekeeping kits | micro-gardening | irrigation systems | climate-smart agriculture and water harvesting | training on good agricultural practices and post-harvest management through farmer field schools | nutrition education | income-generating activities | conservation, processing and marketing of agricultural products | training on smallholder farming systems, pest control and processing techniques



## Support livestock owners and fishing communities

livestock restocking | small ruminant, poultry and pig production | animal health services (vaccinations, deworming and treatment) | veterinary supplies | training and working with community-based animal health workers | market linkages | animal feed | fodder crop seeds | pastoral field schools | pasture regeneration | water points | nutrition education | fish capture and preservation | boat engines



## Contribute to environmental rehabilitation and disaster risk reduction

landslide and flash flood mitigation measures | nursery establishment and reforestation | water management and conservation | capacity building for resource management | sustainable management of natural resources | tree planting | renewable energy | conservation agriculture | disaster and risk management | fuel-efficient cooking stoves



## Cash-based transfers

conditional and unconditional cash transfers | cash for work | cash+ | nutrition vouchers | input vouchers | input trade fairs



## Coordination, food security information and analysis

Food Security Cluster and other coordination solutions | Integrated Food Security Phase Classification and *Cadre Harmonisé* analysis | agriculture/food security assessments | early warning systems | food security and nutrition data collection, analysis, monitoring and dissemination | information management | capacity building | disease surveillance and control





## Anticipating and preparing for crises

Resilient livelihoods are built on a solid foundation of accurate and timely information that directs preparedness, prevention, mitigation and response actions.

**Anticipating, preparing for and preventing crises saves lives and safeguards assets and livelihoods**, protects longer-term development gains and contributes to enhancing food security and income. FAO plays a leading role in global, regional, national and local level early warning systems and analyses.

For example, together with its partners, FAO leads efforts to develop and strengthen the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC), a set of standardized tools that seek to provide a “common currency” for classifying the severity and magnitude of food crises. The IPC and aligned *Cadre Harmonisé* are the foundations of the *Global Report on Food Crises*, which raises awareness of acute hunger and facilitates evidence-based decision-making for resource allocation and action in food crisis contexts.

When there are signs of a deteriorating humanitarian situation, when a disaster occurs, or during the disaster recovery phase, FAO undertakes or participates in various needs assessments, primarily focusing on the needs of vulnerable, food-insecure and crisis-affected populations. The timeliness and quality of assessments help to determine an effective response and can have a lasting impact on the effectiveness of interventions.



©FAO/Colombia

## Translating early warning into early action

Flexible, reliable and timely funding is key to translating warnings to early action.

Linking early warning to early action is particularly critical in the agriculture sector. **For small-scale producers, heeding early warning signals can make the difference between a crisis and a catastrophe.** FAO's Early Warning Early Action system, also known as forecast-based financing, seeks to systematically link early warning triggers to early action.

For example, in 2019, FAO provided early support to mitigate the effects of forced migration and drought in one of the most vulnerable regions of Colombia, La Guajira. A combination of activities (setting up community fields for rapid crop production, providing seeds and tools to individual households, animal health support, and rehabilitating water infrastructure) rapidly boosted food production in an area struggling to absorb large numbers of displaced people as well as cope with the effects of high temperatures and strong winds. This contributed to stabilizing food security and providing livelihood opportunities, as well as to integrating host community and displaced households, strengthening social cohesion. A post-intervention analysis showed that every dollar FAO spent on early action to support vulnerable families generated USD 2.6 in benefits for these households. FAO works with actors from across the development, humanitarian and scientific communities to detect, monitor, prevent and mitigate the risks facing food security.



## Responding fast to crises

Supporting local food production in humanitarian crises is a cost-effective means to rapidly increase and sustain food availability, while protecting livelihoods.

With the vast majority of crisis-hit people relying on agriculture-based livelihoods for their survival, FAO's goal is to safeguard those livelihoods to ensure that people are better able to defend themselves against the worst ravages of natural or human-induced crises.

Even in the most difficult contexts, livelihoods support is not just possible but critical. For example in South Sudan, FAO partners with the United Nations Children's Fund and the World Food Programme (WFP) to deliver immediate and lifesaving humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected populations – even in the hardest to reach areas – through the Integrated Rapid Response Mechanism. In Yemen, where violence means vulnerable people can be cut off from food assistance for days, weeks or even months, crop or vegetable seeds, for example, can provide a vital source of nutritious food to keep a family surviving for months.

FAO also addresses threats to the human food chain through the Food Chain Crisis Management framework, providing, for example, emergency response for desert locust and fall armyworm outbreaks – some of the most destructive transboundary plant pests and diseases that can cause huge losses to crops and pastures – while safeguarding the livelihoods of vulnerable farmers and their food security and nutrition.







©FAO/Paulina Prasuta

## Cash and voucher programmes

- unconditional cash transfers
- conditional cash transfers
- cash for work
- cash+
- nutrition vouchers
- input vouchers

FAO's cash and voucher programmes provide people with the means to immediately cope with crises, protect their livelihoods and strengthen their resilience to future shocks. In humanitarian contexts, **cash and vouchers give choice; they enable recipients to decide by themselves how, when and where to spend the cash to access the goods and services they most need in local markets.**

Cash transfers have the potential to bridge humanitarian and development assistance. For example, humanitarian cash-based interventions can be used as the building blocks for the development of nascent national safety nets or social assistance systems. This can strengthen people's ability to become more self-reliant rather than simply meet basic needs for years on end.

Over the last 20 years, FAO has provided cash and voucher assistance in 61 countries, through seed and input trade fairs, voucher schemes, cash for work, and conditional cash transfers, including in combination with other forms of livelihoods assistance (known as cash+).



©FAO/Luis Tato

## Reducing risks, addressing vulnerabilities

FAO helps crisis-affected and at-risk populations to withstand future shocks by embedding resilience-building within humanitarian activities. This means addressing underlying vulnerabilities and reducing the risks faced by rural communities, for example through promoting and spreading disaster risk reduction and climate resilient production practices.

Actors working across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus need evidence-based, timely, cross-sectoral information to develop appropriate preventative actions and solutions. FAO has pioneered the development and use of Resilience Index Measurement and Analysis (RIMA), which enables a rigorous analysis of how households cope with shocks and stressors.

Conflict is one of the main causes of acute hunger. FAO not only safeguards livelihoods in conflict contexts but actively works to foster social cohesion, generate peace dividends and reduce local-level conflict drivers, especially around natural resource management and use, through interventions that support food security, nutrition and agricultural livelihoods. Recognizing pastoral communities as among the most vulnerable and often overlooked by traditional humanitarian assistance, FAO focuses on enhancing the resilience of pastoral livelihoods through a combination of interventions from improved information on pastoral transhumance, livestock feed and fodder availability to enhancing education opportunities to conducting massive animal health campaigns.





# Saving livelihoods saves lives

## Contact

---

### **FAO Emergency and Resilience Division**

Rome, Italy | [PSE-Director@fao.org](mailto:PSE-Director@fao.org)

---

### **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**

[www.fao.org/emergencies](http://www.fao.org/emergencies)

[www.fao.org/resilience](http://www.fao.org/resilience)



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) licence