



# RETHINKING FOOD CRISIS RESPONSES

APRIL 2023

In 2022, the world faced multiple crises. Disruptions to food systems from the protracted COVID-19 pandemic, major natural disasters, civil unrest and political instability, and the growing impacts of climate change continued, as the Russia-Ukraine war and inflation exacerbated a global food and fertilizer crisis. The growing number of crises, their increasing impact, and rising numbers of hungry and displaced people have galvanized calls to rethink responses to food crises, creating a real opportunity for change.

Now is an opportune moment to create a more holistic, long-term approach to food crisis response by building on existing innovations and exploring new solutions. Traditional crisis response has focused on humanitarian and emergency food aid, but a more systematic and sustainable approach is needed to address more frequent, compounding, and protracted crises. Many tools are already available to the international community and national governments to help them predict, monitor, and respond to crises, and also to govern for long-term resilience and equity. Identifying the most promising options and integrating them into a more permanent response to food crises can reduce the short- and long-term impacts of shocks to food systems.

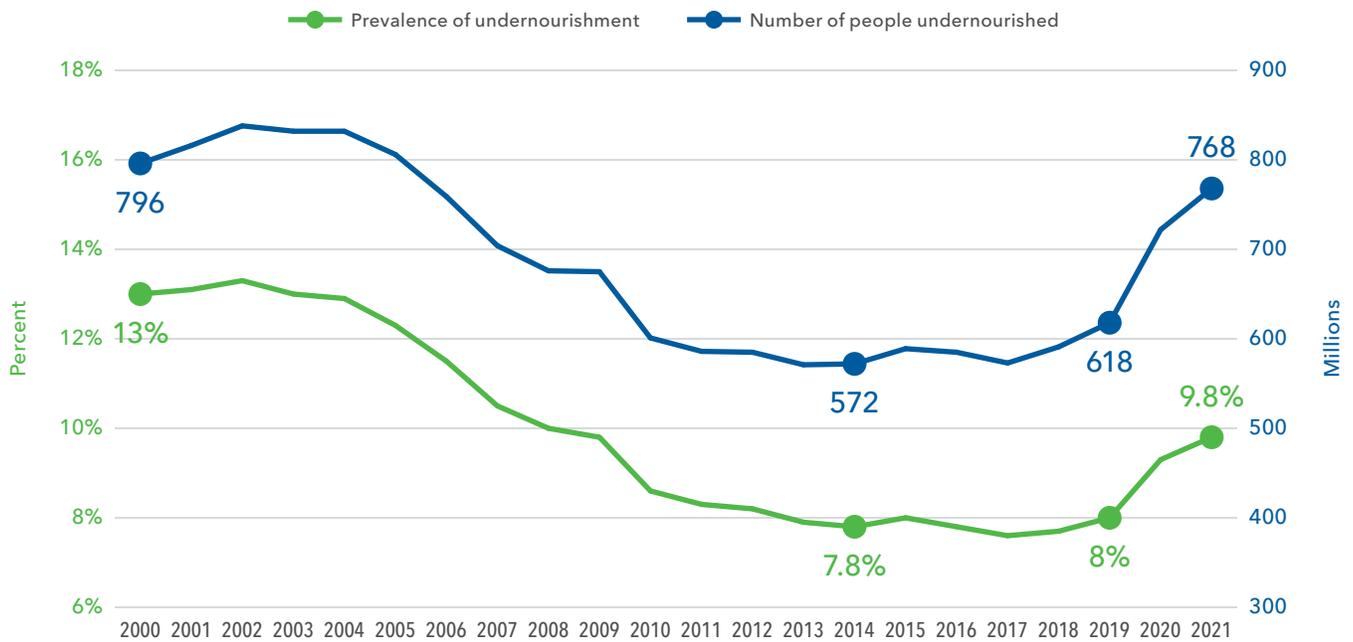
To contribute to this critical effort, the *2023 Global Food Policy Report* draws on a wealth of evidence built over the years by IFPRI and colleagues on policies and programming that reduce hunger and poverty and promote sustainable development and women's empowerment, including during crises. The thematic chapters of the report look at critical tools and approaches for better crisis response. The regional section considers how crises have affected six major world regions in recent years, and how these developments signal new challenges and opportunities.

## VULNERABILITY OF FOOD SYSTEMS AND FOOD SECURITY

Food systems were facing threats well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Global development progress began stagnating a decade ago and even reversing in some places – a marked change following several decades of dramatic declines in hunger and poverty. In 2014, 572 million people were undernourished – a record low (Figure 1). But by 2021, this number had grown to 768 million, largely due to conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, weather-related disasters, and economic downturns in many countries. The pandemic triggered a global recession, widespread labor shortages, food losses, and transport bottlenecks, which affected both the quantity and quality of available food. As the recovery from COVID-19 began, prices surged for food, fuel, and fertilizer, creating new problems that were exacerbated when Russia invaded Ukraine and international food prices rose another 32 percent and fertilizer prices tripled. These prices have since fallen but remain high by historical standards, and many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are plagued by domestic inflation and depreciating currencies. As a result of these compounding



**FIGURE 1 PREVALENCE AND NUMBER OF UNDERNOURISHED WORLDWIDE, 2000–2020**



**Source:** FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, and WHO, *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2022* (Rome: FAO, 2022).

crises, as many as 205 million people in 45 countries experienced crisis-level acute food insecurity or worse by 2022, a number that has nearly doubled since 2016. This constellation of factors has also set back achievement of gender equality by more than 30 years.

Shocks to food systems can take many different forms and vary dramatically in their impacts. When they lead to severe disruptions that cause a surge in acute food insecurity, these shocks are deemed a food crisis. Past experiences show that crises rarely arise from isolated shocks to food systems. They are often compounded, and their negative effects intensified, by long-term sources of fragility, including climate change, poverty, gender and social inequalities, poor governance and lack of trust in public sector institutions, and lack of social cohesion.

Threats from climate change and related natural disasters loom especially large. Climate change is rapidly intensifying, increasing pressure on food systems, rural livelihoods, and ecosystems more broadly, and substantially reducing the average growth in agricultural productivity. More frequent and extreme weather events are having devastating impacts on food systems and human lives (Figure 2), and can increase the risk of plant diseases, pests, and zoonotic diseases. Projections from IFPRI’s IMPACT model find that, with climate change, as many as 72 million more people will

be undernourished by 2050, as compared to a scenario without climate change.

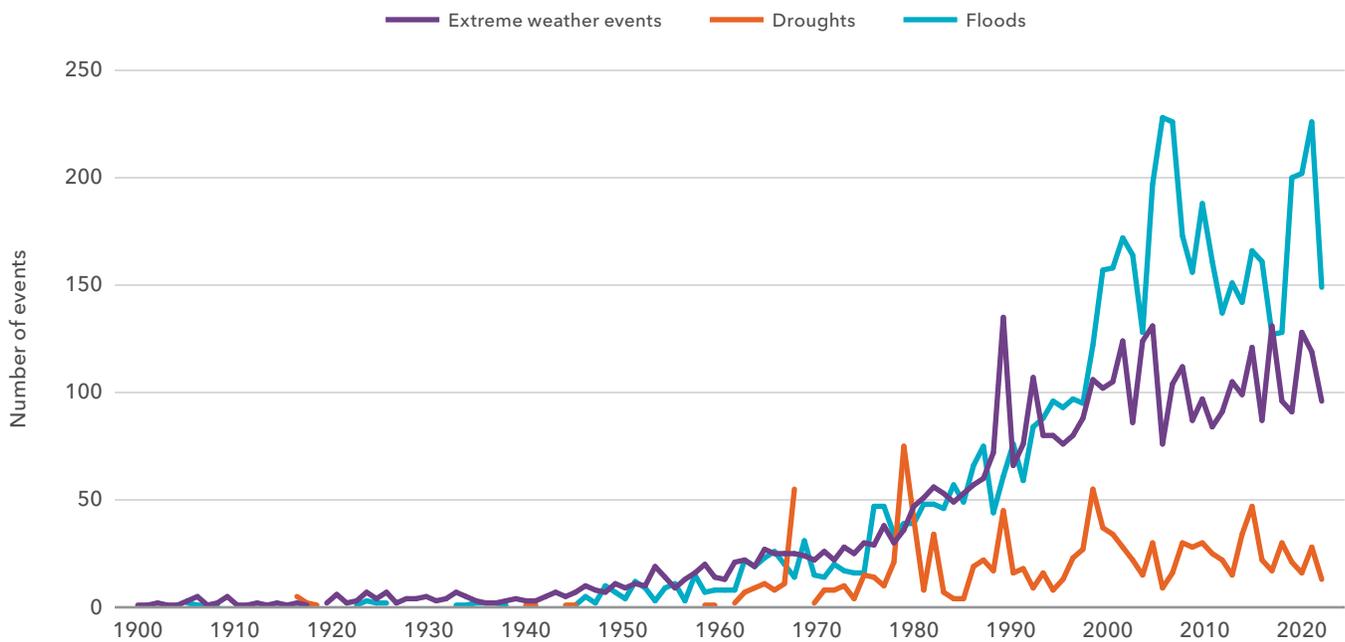
Climate change also affects conflict and displacement. In 2020, about three-quarters of internally displaced people (IDPs) were forced to relocate by disasters – mostly weather-related. Conflict accounts for the other quarter, including in Somalia and Yemen, where famine warnings have recently been issued. In many places, conflict and climate change both contribute to crisis situations, most notably in Syria, Afghanistan, and South Sudan, where numbers of IDPs and refugees are high. Of the more than 200 million people facing acute food insecurity in 2022, most live in protracted crisis situations – that is, situations marked by prolonged civil strife and conflict, repeated weather shocks, and economic decline, or some combination thereof.

## UNEQUAL IMPACTS

### Economic vulnerability

Recent crises highlight the vast differences in how food system shocks affect the rich and the poor – both countries and their vulnerable populations. In general, LMICs have fared worse throughout many recent shocks, due to limited budgets to enact

**FIGURE 2 TRENDS IN EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS, DROUGHTS, AND FLOODS, 1900–2022**



**Source:** Data from EM-DAT, accessed January 2023. <https://emdat.be/>

**Note:** Extreme weather includes severe storms, tornados, sandstorms, and extreme temperatures among other events.

stimulus and social protection measures, reduced remittances from high-income countries, and rapidly rising import bills for food and agricultural inputs. Within these countries, vulnerable populations bear the brunt of crises. These groups – which include rural smallholders, the urban poor, the landless, IDPs, and refugees – can be made even more vulnerable by other compounding factors, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and social class.

Coping strategies can affect food and nutrition security, as well as long-term well-being. Among the poor, for example, shifting to cheaper, less nutritious staple foods is a common response. Other damaging strategies include selling off productive assets and reducing spending on education and health – particularly for girls. Earlier marriage of girls is another response that leads to lasting harm.

Migration, either voluntary or forced, can have negative health implications and create challenges for livelihoods and access to productive resources, for both migrants and their host communities. However, it can also be a productive strategy that helps households escape crises, diversify risks, and expand income-generating activities.

Food system shocks are felt most severely in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where 1.5 billion

people currently live. On average, 30 percent of people in countries facing protracted crisis situations live in extreme poverty – a situation that can prevent them from adapting to and recovering from shocks. Forced migrants – including IDPs and refugees – are among the most vulnerable. By 2022, a projected 103 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, with most refugees living in LMICs, and 80 percent had experienced acute food insecurity and high levels of malnutrition.

### Gender and food crises

Women are disproportionately harmed by crises, given the structural and normative barriers that limit their resilience and ability to respond effectively. More so than for men, shocks reduce women’s access to food and dietary diversity, decision-making power within their households, assets, services like health-care, and physical safety, and also deepen their time poverty. These vulnerabilities stem from women’s already limited access to resources, technologies, and services, as well as to channels of power and influence that could help them benefit from crisis response policies and programming.

Rural women in LMICs face barriers not only to accessing land, water, and other productive resources,

but also to complementary resources, technologies, and services needed for agricultural production and participation in the food system. For example, having less social capital can limit women's access to technology (such as modern agricultural inputs and information and communications technology [ICT]), agricultural advisory services, and financial services. Crises can increase these gender gaps in resource access, intensify the burden of unpaid care work for women, and worsen gender-based violence.



## A NEW, MORE PERMANENT RESPONSE

During recent crises, food systems proved surprisingly resilient in some ways, and a range of promising approaches have already been shown to promote resilience along with other development goals. Understanding these strengths can help stakeholders rethink the way forward and build on what works as they respond to new crises. The thematic chapters in this report, summarized below, explore some of the most promising policies, programming, and tools to better predict and prepare for crises, address crises when they occur, and build more resilient and equitable food systems.

### Preparing for crises

Early warning systems, especially in combination with anticipatory action efforts, can facilitate both immediate humanitarian responses and the integration of aid with longer-term development strategies.

**EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS.** Early-warning, early-action (EWEA) systems alert policymakers and international humanitarian agencies to sudden and significant increases in acute food insecurity that signal food crises, and provide guidance on where and when to target





humanitarian efforts. A timely and effective response depends on accurately identifying and tracking different food crisis situations; understanding how they affect different populations, sectors, and places; and addressing the pressures exerted on people and food systems.

Multiple systems are already monitoring chronic and acute food insecurity as well as trends in global agri-food markets, such as sudden price changes for agricultural commodities and fertilizers. This information is extremely useful, but ideally it should be consolidated and improved to shape responses more precisely. This will require filling gaps in monitoring and analysis, particularly to understand and track the drivers of crises in diverse contexts, including compound crises. It will also require better integration of existing systems to ensure that policymakers and others receive clear, timely warning signals of potential crises and guidance on priority setting. In addition, new processes are needed that allow for faster identification and response to crises, especially to identify famine, where immediate response is most crucial.

#### **HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND ANTICIPATORY**

**ACTION.** The vast majority of humanitarian response is activated after a crisis occurs, delivering life-saving aid but at relatively high costs. During crises, rapid response is critical to reach households before they

deplete savings or engage in damaging coping strategies, and before widespread repercussions occur. Anticipatory action frameworks help prepare and organize humanitarian aid before crises strike by allocating funds, responsibilities, and supplies in advance. These frameworks, along with innovative forms of humanitarian assistance, show promise for mitigating crises at lower costs and supporting longer-term development efforts. Once triggered by an early warning system, the anticipatory action plan can be implemented smoothly and without lengthy delays.

Anticipatory action requires monitoring data that illuminate risks, exposure, and vulnerability; information services that can reach vulnerable people and



advise them on how to respond; and a clear decision support system, especially in fragile settings where government authority may be weak. Its effective delivery also depends on robust governance arrangements, which can ensure appropriate targeting and deployment. When more broadly conceived, anticipatory action can help shift the focus of crisis response toward longer-term resilience and development by incorporating nutrition-sensitive programming, making use of local procurement, and supporting local institutions and more permanent safety nets. This approach could play a crucial role in mitigating food system shocks, but currently makes up only a small percentage of humanitarian aid. To increase adoption of these programs, more data and research are needed on the effectiveness of different humanitarian assistance approaches and anticipatory action programs for protecting food and nutrition security – particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

### Creating resilient food systems

Building resilience to food crises can reduce both the likelihood and impact of crises, if and when they occur. This requires social protection systems for vulnerable households and efforts to strengthen the agrifood value chains that ensure availability of food and support numerous livelihoods.

**SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SAFETY NETS.** Social protection systems, including safety net programs that provide food or cash transfers, can both build resilience prior to a crisis and facilitate crisis recovery. They are most effective when they are flexible, shock responsive, and well targeted. Before a crisis, safety nets help households and communities build assets, increase productive investments, and diversify income sources. During crises, social safety nets can prevent negative coping strategies that pose a risk to long-term health and livelihoods. Many LMICs have dramatically expanded their social safety nets in recent years, but as the COVID-19 pandemic and recent food price spikes showed, coverage is low in the poorest countries, and many cannot access these safety nets – particularly the urban poor.

A proactive approach is needed to develop social protection systems that are highly adaptive, flexible, and inclusive, and can be quickly expanded when crises strike. Support can be scaled up more quickly and effectively by integrating these “shock-responsive” social protection systems with EWEA systems and humanitarian aid, and creating unified and digitized targeting systems. In addition, integrating social protection with gender and climate goals can further empower women and promote environmental sustainability. Given the great need to expand safety net

programs, new ways to cover costs should be explored, such as integration with green financing schemes, as well as ways to reduce implementation costs, including cash transfers and mobile payments.

**AGRIFOOD VALUE CHAINS.** The successful functioning of food systems relies on agrifood value chains, including the production, processing, transport, and marketing of food. Value chains differ greatly in their structure and local contexts, which in turn affects the impact of shocks and value chain responses. Given these differences, crisis responses are likely to be more effective when tailored to the type of shock, the particular context and value chain, and if possible, different enterprise sizes.

Agrifood value chains can support livelihoods and food security during crises when the business environment fosters flexibility and technical and financial innovation, and governments provide essential infrastructure and targeted assistance for value chain actors. The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of flexibility for all types of value chains and their actors. Almost everywhere, food-related businesses that were able to digitize and develop new marketing mechanisms amid pandemic-related restrictions proved harder than those that were not. Private sector actors can increase

their businesses' resilience by investing in improved and innovative tools, such as climate-smart agriculture and new forms of insurance. Governments can provide support by creating a regulatory and business environment that fosters value chain innovations and ensures that women-owned enterprises can take advantage of them. Governments can also support an open trade policy to facilitate the diversification of value chains. Before and during crises, government monitoring can help to ensure the continuation of private trading and guide it where needed.

### Supporting and empowering the most vulnerable

Building resilience among the most vulnerable populations, particularly women and forced migrants, can reduce the impact of crises when they occur and speed recovery. Food system resilience must therefore include a strong focus on enhancing livelihoods and inclusion.

**EMPOWERING WOMEN.** Empowering women amid crisis situations is particularly important, given that they shoulder a disproportionate share of negative impacts and often deplete their assets or compromise their diets as a coping mechanism. A first step to increase equity involves improving the quality of





gender-disaggregated data collected before and during crisis situations, including on women's access to programs meant to support them. Innovative methods, such as phone surveys, can facilitate data collection in fragile and conflict-affected settings. When decision-makers have more specific information, policies and programming can be tailored to better support the women who are enduring negative effects. Effective policy responses along with legal protections also need to account for the barriers that women face to participating in food systems, their domestic work burdens, and the likelihood of gender-based violence, all of which are likely to increase amid crises.

Amid crises, being explicit about gender targets and tracking progress is central to promoting gender equality. For the long term, effective gender-focused interventions including cash transfers, self-help groups and other civil society organizations, and/or technical and vocational training, among others, can help women in diverse settings build resilience to shocks and crises.

Efforts must also be made to increase women's political participation and agency in their communities. Women's voices must be included in peace processes and high-level settings where policymaking and programming decisions are made, so that crisis

responses improve rather than erode gender equality. Such policy responses can empower and create opportunities for women while also addressing the adverse impacts of crises. In addition, supporting women's access to resources and technologies, including mobile phones, can help them better weather crises.

**FORCED MIGRATION.** Conflict and climatic and economic crises often trigger forced migration, creating challenges and opportunities for migrants and their sending and host communities. Although people forced to migrate often face high risks and food insecurity, migration can play an important role in improving individual livelihoods and economic development. Forced migrants and refugees have been shown to make positive contributions to their host communities' economies, and remittances to sending communities can provide substantial benefits as well. Thus, all stand to benefit from policies that facilitate economic and social integration of migrants, including cash transfers, training programs, and the right to work and choose a place of residence. However, forced migration can strain host communities when resources and opportunities are limited, requiring efforts to limit migration from sending communities while strengthening the absorptive capacity of host communities.



Governments, NGOs, and development organizations can better address the root causes of forced migration through innovative data collection and research, especially on irregular migration and the needs of women. They can build the capacity of hosting communities by investing in infrastructure and services and designing policies that expand the benefits of migration and limit harms. Innovative approaches hold great potential to accelerate the transition from humanitarian action to longer-term development, such as by aligning social protection and climate action objectives to mutually support peace, security, and sustainability. Attention must also be paid to those who remain behind, because they often lack the resources or social networks needed for migration, and are least capable of recovering from a crisis.

## FOUNDATIONS FOR BETTER CRISIS RESPONSE

Improving international and national responses to food crises cannot be done without accountable governance and effective institutions, policies, and programming, as well as reliable funding and oversight to ensure that responses address immediate needs and long-term resilience.

### Governance

Effective governance at all levels is critical to developing early warning, anticipatory action, and policy responses that are sustainable and responsive to the compounding drivers of crisis. Institutions and public sector incentives must support government accountability (that is, responsiveness to citizens' needs and preferences), as well as the equitable, reliable, and cost-effective provision of infrastructure and services. This requires making the best use of government investments and ensuring the effective deployment, communication, and continuity of anticipatory action, humanitarian assistance, social protection, and other programs critical to averting and addressing shocks and crises. Effective governance can also minimize market disruptions and incentivize private sector investments that promote resilience. Finally, it can contribute to trust and social cohesion to help avoid internal conflicts and future crises.

Many promising approaches exist to build effective governance. For example, transparency and the free flow of information, including through ICT that connects government with citizens, can help make governments more accountable. Improving the incentive environment for bureaucrats and frontline service providers can ensure that they are hired and promoted for delivering what matters to citizens. Education and

training can help guarantee that the voices of women and other vulnerable groups are included in crisis responses. Both international and local actors can use research tools to track social, economic, and environmental risks and to monitor and evaluate policy responses to crises.

### Financing mechanisms

The developments of the past few years have dramatically increased the need for crisis response funding. In 2023, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs appealed for US\$52 billion in funding for humanitarian assistance and social protection, a 461 percent increase since 2012. But funding received in 2022 amounted to only \$24 billion. Moreover, governments were forced to spend record amounts on social protection in response to compound crises, even as programs faced disruptions due to these very shocks.

Smart investments to build resilient food systems, while costly, are far more cost-efficient and effective

than reacting to crises after they occur. The finance lever of the UN Food Systems Summit estimates that it would cost between \$300 billion and \$400 billion per year through 2030 to transform food systems for sustainability and resilience. Some of this investment can be used to expand credit market access to smallholders and small and medium enterprises in LMICs; this would provide these businesses with a short-term financial cushion and an opportunity for long-term investment in resilience-enhancing technology and practices. At the national and international levels, financial flows should be redirected toward more crisis-resilient technology, practices, and infrastructure. In fragile settings, forecast-based finance schemes, which speed responses, could be expanded and deployed.

Available funds can be increased by repurposing the more than \$600 billion in global spending that goes to agricultural support. Some funds could be reallocated to incentivize the adoption of more sustainable, climate-smart practices and invested



in agricultural research and development aimed at traditional targets such as productivity gains, as well as new targets such as improved resilience. Policymakers can also do more to shift private investment toward crisis prevention and resilience. Both the quantity and quality of private sector funding for resilience can be improved by creating an enabling environment and incentivizing investments that support livelihoods and sustainability. Business opportunities in food and agriculture to implement sustainable development actions could be quite profitable for the private sector. Ultimately, all such changes to current financial flows would prevent even greater future costs in the form of crisis response, economic disruption, and loss of life.

## CONCLUSION

Food systems are not only susceptible to increasingly complex and compounding shocks, but are also

closely intertwined with other essential systems – climate and environmental services, trade and the economy, infrastructure, governance, healthcare, and social protection. Failures within these systems can cause crises in our food systems, and in turn, weaknesses in our food systems can drive environmental degradation, conflict, economic disruptions, and poverty and inequity.

Building a more proactive response to disaster – one that is anticipatory, flexible, and inclusive – can produce multiple benefits. The process of improving crisis response systems should be rooted in high-quality evidence: robust data, state-of-the-art tools, and policy analyses and scenarios. This evidence can help policymakers, donors, the international development community, and the private sector to move quickly in times of need. Increasing crises in human systems and the natural world will not abate in coming years – the time to step up our efforts to develop a more permanent, sustainable response is now.



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