

MERCY CORPS  
FOOD SECURITY  
SECTOR APPROACH  
2009



*Photo: Thatcher Cook for Mercy Corps*

## INTRODUCTION

Mercy Corps helps people in the world's toughest places turn the crises of natural disaster, poverty and conflict into opportunities for progress. Driven by local needs and market conditions, our programs provide communities with the tools and support they need to transform their own lives. Our worldwide team of 3,700 professionals is improving the lives of 14.5 million people in more than 40 countries. In recognition that access to adequate food and nutritional sustenance is integral to the success of relief and development programming, Mercy Corps currently operates upwards of 40 food security development projects in over 20 countries, worth approximately \$200 million. These projects work with **communities and households to develop and implement sustainable approaches to meeting their own food needs and improve food availability, access and utilization, as well as the ability to withstand shocks.**

It is estimated that more than 1 billion people live in hunger.<sup>1</sup> That means one person in every seven is at risk from one of the most deadly and widespread health issues in the world today, malnutrition. UNICEF estimates 60 percent of child deaths in developing countries are from malnutrition, and those that survive hunger in the early stages of life are at risk from irreparable physical and mental health issues. While this level of health and hunger is severe, the food security sector offers an effective leverage point to alleviate this suffering: The UN claims there is enough food on the planet to provide the global population with a healthy and nutritious diet. Agriculture plays a crucial role in developing countries where the 450 million small farms – two hectares or less – are home to about 2 billion people, comprising roughly 46 percent of the global workforce.<sup>2</sup> Improvements in health care, water and sanitation conditions and hygienic household practices can allow children to grow up well nourished and families to maintain good health and nutrition status. Mercy Corps believes that the human capital exists to eradicate chronic hunger and malnutrition. Our food security programs attempt to catalyze this potential in order to find viable long-term solutions to the availability, access and utilization of food resources.

The design and implementation of our food security programming is proving to be effective for the complex, transitional environments in which we work. Our field reports show there is clear synergy with our agricultural, economic development and health sectors, as well as the Mercy Corps Action Center to End World Hunger and our environmental and conflict management programming.

<sup>1</sup> UN WFP, <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/stats>

<sup>2</sup> World Bank Development Database.



Photo: Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

## WHAT IS FOOD SECURITY?

### Defining Food Security

Food security is commonly defined as “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”<sup>3</sup> Four interrelated variables are central to achieving food security:

1. **Food Availability** – when sufficient quantity is consistently available to all individuals through household production, domestic output, commercial imports or food assistance.
2. **Food Access** – when households and all individuals have adequate resources to obtain appropriate foods for a nutritious diet. Access depends on income available to the household, distribution of food among members of the household and the price of food.
3. **Food Utilization** – the proper use of food requires a diet with sufficient energy and essential nutrients, potable water and adequate sanitation. Effective utilization depends on good health and knowledge within households of basic principals of nutrition and proper childcare.
4. **Risk Management** – the degree to which individuals, households or communities can cope with and withstand stressful situations and shocks. Vulnerability can be grouped into five categories by risk factors: environmental, market, political, social and health. Inability to manage risks can lead to food insecurity.

### Food Secure Households

A food secure household is one that can produce, or access, sufficient amounts of nutritious food for all family members, one that enjoys good health and sanitation facilities and practices, and one that is resilient to shocks that might make the household vulnerable again. In other words, a food secure household has met its essential health, economic and productive needs. While the household might still be poor, its members are not challenged by day-to-day threats to its survival caused by lack of food, and can work towards longer-term development priorities.

<sup>3</sup> USAID key concepts, adopted at World Food Summit of 1996, reconfirmed at World Food Summit of 2002.

## MERCY CORPS' FOOD SECURITY APPROACH

### Food Security Sector Mission

Through its food security programming, Mercy Corps aims to empower households and communities to develop and implement sustainable approaches to meeting their own food needs and improve food availability, access and utilization, as well as the ability to withstand shocks.

### Food Availability

The first necessary condition for food security is straightforward: food must be **available** to be consumed. Mercy Corps approaches issues of availability through several means, including building agricultural production, improving access to markets and providing food distribution. Mercy Corps works with small farmers to increase agricultural production, through providing inputs or capacity building, in order to increase household consumption, as well as a source of income. Mercy Corps' emergency and developmental relief programs work in situations in which there has been a food deficit and food distribution has been urgently needed to provide vulnerable people with sufficient caloric intake.

Our **agricultural development** initiatives play a pivotal roll in facilitating food security for the people we serve. This sector takes a market driven approach to ensure scaled and sustainable impact results. Mercy Corps maps out the interrelationships between buyers, sellers, producers and end consumers along respective value chains and intervenes through a variety of means such as infrastructure improvements, technical assistance, financing and technology upgrades. Programs create and support agricultural market systems that favor economic growth for the largest number of smallholder farmers and related agri-business entrepreneurs. The outcome of this includes the greater availability of nutritious and affordable food in local consumer markets.

### Food Access

While food may be available, there is no guarantee that all household members will be able to **access** it. Lack of purchasing power keeps many families from obtaining the food necessary for a healthy and productive life. Mercy Corps works at a grassroots level to help households sustainably build their income. While we work on economic development on many levels, food security programming focuses on the most vulnerable.

Mercy Corps' **market development** programming plays a vital role in increasing incomes and productivity in market systems, ultimately facilitating access to food resources. The sector takes a progressive approach that leads communities and entrepreneurs from relief to sustainable livelihoods to long-term economic growth. Every context is different, and programming builds on the unique economic potential of each country. Engaging with entrepreneurs and producers at the community level as well as with lead firms and buyers, Mercy Corps helps ensure poor families and vulnerable communities benefit from the increased revenues that result from market improvements and sector growth. As economies grow, so does the access to available food and the nutritional health of the households and communities we serve.

### Food Utilization

Being able to produce or purchase food is not sufficient to ensure a healthy life: food needs to be selected and prepared appropriately, with adequate health care, child care and water and sanitation conditions in place. Mercy Corps addresses underlying causes of food insecurity through programs that address maternal and child health issues, safe water provision, hygiene and sanitation practices and HIV/AIDS education, prevention and rehabilitation. This permits the body to effectively **utilize** the food it consumes.

Mercy Corps' programs tackle critical health issues and disparities through community-based activities carried out alongside public and private partners, focusing on **maternal and child health, community nutrition, fighting infectious diseases and improving water and sanitation**. Receiving sufficient calories and micronutrients from the womb through the age of 24 months is essential for a child to reach his or her physical and cognitive potential, and avoid the lifelong condition of stunting. Mercy Corps promotes sound practices in pre- and post-natal care, breastfeeding, introduction of complementary feeding and proper child care so that caregivers can achieve and maintain good health for their children. As diseases such as HIV/AIDS greatly compromise people's health and food security, Mercy Corps implements programs to prevent further infection and to protect the livelihoods of those living with the disease. We also work to improve water and sanitation conditions and hygiene practices, understanding the intimate connection between sound hygiene and sustainable health and nutrition status.

## Risk Management – Establishing Resiliency

If the components of availability, access and utilization cannot be **sustained**, then households cannot realistically be considered as food secure. Mercy Corps’ programs work towards long-term solutions to food insecurity through a variety of approaches. At the time that food security programs are designed, Mercy Corps seeks to identify the longer-term causes of insecurity, be they social, political, environmental, health or market related. Program activities directly address those threats, and promote systems and structures that will enable food security sustainability. Such systems can also provide platforms for ongoing community development.

Mercy Corps’ **climate and environment** sector is helping to address one of the greatest risks to long-term food security: climate change. Recognizing that climate change threatens to undermine any development or food security progress made to date in support of the populations that we serve, Mercy Corps implements a variety of program interventions aimed at both mitigating and adapting to the impacts of this worldwide phenomenon. Through the means of alternative energy, sustainable resource management and advocacy and outreach, Mercy Corps is helping communities fortify gains made to their food security for the foreseeable future.

## VISUALIZING OUR APPROACH

For a household or community to be considered food secure, they must sustainably participate in the four pillars of food security, ‘availability,’ ‘access,’ ‘utilization’ and ‘risk management.’ These qualities are interrelated and all are necessary for long-term food security. For example, having ample availability of food is not sufficient for living a healthy and productive life unless one has both the financial access to the food and the knowledge on how to prepare it while retaining its nutritional value. Mercy Corps’ food security approach ensures programmatic impact by facilitating initiatives that address all four pillars. Ultimately, it is the confluence of these four qualities that result in more food secure households and communities.



## USING FOOD RESOURCES

Mercy Corps implements several programs that use food resources to address food insecurity. These resources are utilized in the following ways:

**Distribution** - Food is provided directly to beneficiaries. The goals of distribution include **recuperation** (providing nutritional and caloric intake to the malnourished to allow them to attain good health), **prevention** (providing food resources so that malnutrition does not occur) and **incentive** (motivating beneficiaries to participate in program activities, such as Food for Work or health education). An advantage of distribution programs is that they can be an excellent way of targeting the most vulnerable: food resources must be of value to participants in relation to their own time and effort, so self-selection of the very poor occurs. A disadvantage is the potential for creating dependency, and the increased difficulty of exit strategies: transitioning to other kinds of development may seem more abrupt when one element of that transition is the discontinuation of food rations. Mercy Corps addresses this by making sure that other activities address the root causes of food insecurity so that a household will be more self-sufficient by the time food distributions cease.



Photo: Cassandra Nelson/Mercy Corps

**Barter** - Commodities are shipped to beneficiary country and processed (for example, enriched flour into biscuits). The processed product is then either distributed or monetized in pursuit of program objectives. Barter provides a means for supporting processing industries and producing culturally and nutritionally appropriate products.

**Monetization** - Commodities are shipped to beneficiary country and sold (usually in bulk) on the market; income is used to fund program activities. If commodities are chosen correctly, they match unsatisfied demand in the recipient country, so that both commodity sale and subsequent program meet local needs. Most programs funded by monetization are required to specifically address food security issues. In particular, the US Department of Agriculture (a frequent donor for monetization programs) targets agricultural development and agricultural markets.

All Mercy Corps programs using food resources start with an analysis of the market impact of bringing commodities into the country (for US government-funded programs, this is known as the Bellmon Analysis). For example, will the import of such commodities negatively impact agricultural production or the business of local traders? Food resources should only be brought into a country if demand outstrips supply and analysis finds no significant risk of negative consequences.

#### GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS

Mercy Corps  
45 SW Ankeny Street  
Portland, OR 97204  
800.292.3355  
[www.mercycorps.org](http://www.mercycorps.org)

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You must be the change  
you wish to see in the world.

~ Gandhi