Briefing

Food and agriculture

Reflections on knowledge gained and key lessons learnt from IIED and partner research and action

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Project overview

Title:
Easing and de-risking transition to climate-resilient food production for enhanced self-reliance in humanitarian contexts

Timeframe:
January 2024–April 2026

Summary:
With evidence from pilots in Kenya (Turkana county), Southern Lebanon (Saida district) and Nepal (Barbardiya municipality) as well as a literature review and expert interviews, this multi-country learning initiative explored how to pursue a food system transition based on agroecological principles in acute or protracted humanitarian crisis situations characterised by conflict, displacement, climate shocks, vulnerability and market disruption.

Change in action

The project demonstrated that, with careful design and implementation, agroecology can support humanitarian objectives. Adopting an iterative learning approach with ongoing monitoring and adaptation can help practitioners identify stakeholders and co-develop low-risk, contextually appropriate interventions.

Can agroecology-based food system transitions work in humanitarian crises?

Evidence from Kenya, Lebanon and Nepal shows that agroecological approaches can strengthen resilience

Humanitarian crises profoundly disrupt food systems. They weaken public institutions, fragment markets, limit access to land and water, erode livelihoods and reduce households' capacity to absorb risk. They also expose the vulnerability of food systems that depend heavily on external inputs, long supply chains and volatile imports. In such settings, agroecology offers a pathway to rebuild food systems that are more resilient, locally anchored and socially inclusive.

Agroecology is not a fixed set of practices. Rather, it is a transition framework guided by principles and elements including diversity, synergy, recycling, co-creation of knowledge, fairness and responsible governance.[1] Applied through a food systems lens, it does not focus solely on farm-level technologies. Instead, it links production, markets, institutions, social relations and consumption.

Evidence from the three pilots indicates that agroecological approaches can contribute to humanitarian objectives by:

- Reducing dependence on external inputs and vulnerable supply chains
- Strengthening climate resilience through soil health, biodiversity and diversified livelihoods
- Supporting social cohesion and local agency through collective action and farmer-to-farmer learning, and
- Creating bridges between emergency response, recovery and longer-term development.

This shows that, while agroecology is not a substitute for life-saving assistance, it allows us to align short-term humanitarian action with longer-term resilience and self-reliance.

Key findings

Relevance under conditions of vulnerability: agroecological approaches are particularly relevant where input and output markets are disrupted, and where price volatility and import dependence heighten vulnerability. Low external input practices, local seed systems, soil and water conservation, and diversified cropping and livestock systems can lower recurrent costs and increase adaptive capacity. In all three pilots, agroecology aligned closely with climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction objectives.

Social and institutional dimensions matter: beyond technical practices, the social principles of agroecology are crucial in crisis-affected settings. Participatory learning, recognition of local knowledge and inclusive governance help rebuild trust and cooperation between host communities, displaced populations and local authorities. Agroecology also provides an entry point for addressing power imbalances and strengthening local institutions weakened by crisis.

Transition pathways must be phased and derisked: food system transition in humanitarian contexts must be non-linear and low-risk.

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Crisis-affected households have limited assets and low tolerance for failure. Poorly sequenced or inadequately supported interventions can increase labour burdens, deepen gender inequalities or undermine livelihoods.

Effective transition therefore requires: deliberate 'derisking', including careful sequencing across response, early recovery and stabilisation phases; prioritising low-regret options that deliver immediate benefits but are also compatible with longer-term transition — such as diversified seed support, home and community gardens, soil and water management and local procurement; strong access to information, extension, finance and social protection; and explicit attention to labour dynamics and gendered impacts.

Markets and value chains are essential: without reliable market outlets and fair prices, producers have little incentive to invest in diversified and sustainable systems. The pilots demonstrated the potential of territorial markets, short value chains, aggregation, processing and public or humanitarian procurement to stimulate demand for agroecological produce, even where conventional markets are weak or distorted.

Institutional coordination is a decisive factor: no single actor can drive food system transition in crisis settings. Governments are central to creating an enabling environment through policy coherence, regulation and public investment. Humanitarian and development organisations can act as bridge-builders, piloting context-adapted approaches, strengthening public systems and linking emergency programming with longer-term food system strategies. And donors and international finance institutions strongly shape incentives through funding modalities, time horizons and accountability frameworks.

But government capacities are often constrained in crisis contexts, while rigid, short-term project cycles and narrow output indicators discourage systemic change. Progress depends on governments, humanitarian and development agencies, civil society actors, producer organisations, research institutions and the private sector working together, as well as flexible, multiyear and blended humanitarian–development–climate finance that tolerates learning and allows for transition costs.

Recommendations

Integrate agroecology into humanitarian and recovery frameworks by mainstreaming agroecological principles into food security, resilience, climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies, rather than treating it as a separate agenda.

Align short-term response with long-term transition by designing emergency and early recovery interventions in a way that avoids undermining local markets, knowledge systems and ecological sustainability, and where possible, lays foundations for food system transformation.

Invest in institutions and learning, not just technology, by supporting extension services, farmer organisations, local authorities and multistakeholder platforms as well as on-farm practices. Continuous learning and adaptive management are essential under conditions of uncertainty.

Adopt derisking approaches for vulnerable households through social protection, access to finance, gender-sensitive labour arrangements and market support to ensure short-term costs do not fall disproportionately on the poorest and most marginalised.

Provide coherent, flexible and long-term financing to support multiyear, integrated programming that bridges humanitarian and development objectives, accepts transition risks and learning curves, and strengthens local ownership and capacity.

Conclusion

Evidence from the three pilots demonstrates that agroecological food system transition is both feasible and relevant in humanitarian and protracted crisis contexts. While inherently complex and potentially risky, it offers a pathway to address immediate food security needs while building the ecological, social and institutional foundations for more resilient and equitable food systems. For policymakers and funders, the key challenge is not whether agroecology can work in crisis settings, but how to create the enabling conditions, sequencing and partnerships required for a safe, inclusive and sustainable transition.

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Key lessons

- A sustainable and complete agroecological food system transition requires a cross-sectoral coalition of partners (including national and local government) to bring about lasting impacts.
- In acute and protracted humanitarian crisis contexts, agroecological practices and principles can create bridges between early recovery and long-term resilience building and self-reliance.
- Reducing uncertainties and risks and including insurance mechanisms can help adapt the transition to humanitarian crisis contexts.
- Experiential learning cycles involving all key stakeholders can help keep the process locally relevant and sustainable.

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DanChurchAid supports the poorest in the world in their struggle for a dignified life.

Knowledge Products

Notes

[1] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2018) The 10 elements of agroecology. Guiding the transition to sustainable food and agricultural systems. Rome; High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security (2019) Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition. Rome.