FROM SILOS TO SYSTEMS

Advancing Integrated Nutrition and Food Security in Canada's Approach to International Assistance

Policy Brief prepared by:
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Executive Summary

Global hunger and malnutrition remain unacceptably high, with up to 720 million people experiencing chronic hunger in 2024 and alarming rates of child wasting and anemia. Vulnerable populations in developing countries are disproportionately affected, as conflict, climate shocks, economic instability, and declining donor support converge to deepen food insecurity and strain humanitarian systems. Traditional siloed approaches—where humanitarian, agricultural, and nutrition sectors operate independently—are no longer sufficient to address these complex, overlapping challenges.

This policy brief advocates for a strategic shift from fragmented programming to integrated food systems approaches. By aligning humanitarian aid, agricultural development, and nutrition interventions under a shared vision, Canada can help build more resilient, equitable, and sustainable food systems that prioritize healthy diets and long-term impact, while addressing gender inequalities that shape who produces, accesses, and consumes nutritious food.

Key Messages

- **Current fragmentation limits impact and sustainability:** Disconnected efforts across sectors result in inefficiencies, duplication, and missed opportunities. Food production may increase yields without improving nutrition, and emergency food aid may save lives without supporting recovery or resilience.
- **Integrated approaches improve efficiency, equity, and resilience:** Integrated food security and nutrition programming enhances dietary diversity, reduces child wasting, and strengthens communities against future shocks. It draws on local food cultures, empowers women, and fosters self-reliance—delivering better value for money and reducing the need for costly downstream health interventions.
- **Strategic recommendations for Canada's leadership:** Canada has a legacy of global leadership in food and nutrition. By championing integrated food systems and nutrition approaches, Canada can reaffirm its commitment to sustainable development and equity. This includes supporting local procurement, diversified farming systems, prioritizing support for women and girls, and cross-sectoral coordination to maximize human and financial returns.

In Practice

Case studies from Canadian and multilateral organizations demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated approaches:

- UNICEF's First Foods Africa supports local production of nutrient-rich foods for children through investment, policy reform, and demand generation.
- Canadian Foodgrains Bank's HERD Program links food assistance with agricultural training, resulting in sustained improvements in food consumption and nutrition even after aid ends.
- Nutrition International works in Bangladesh to integrate fortified rice into national programs to improve nutrition without changing diets or increasing costs.

These examples show that integrated programming is not only feasible—it is transformative. Canada has the opportunity to scale such approaches globally, breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition and building a future where all people can access safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food.

Context

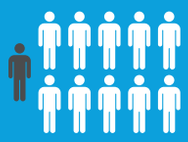
Global hunger and malnutrition remains extremely high, with vulnerable populations in developing countries hit the hardest.

Despite revised and less ambitious global targets, progress on nutrition remains far too slow. Rates of child wasting and anemia in women of reproductive age remain stubbornly high, underscoring how distant we still are from achieving even the adjusted global nutrition targets.[1]

720 million people

FACED SEVERE FOOD INSECURITY IN 2024

1 IN 11
GLOBALLY



1 IN 5
IN AFRICA



1 IN 7
IN THE MIDDLE EAST



This reality has been caused by a confluence of disturbances including conflict, economic disruptions, and climate shocks. In many countries, these are being felt simultaneously.

- **Protracted crises** are requiring emergency responses to go beyond the traditional three-to-six-month time frame. They must now bridge into development work to address the root causes of the crisis and support communities in building resilience to future shocks.
- **Economic disruptions** including high food prices are pushing more people into poverty, making it more difficult for families to access affordable nutritious food and thereby increasing various forms of malnutrition, which have devastating long-term health impacts.
- **Mounting climate variability** is making it more difficult for people to grow food, which can lead to or exacerbate conflict as well as economic disruptions, and increase malnutrition. For example, drought conditions raise the likelihood of both wasting and underweight by almost 50 percent.[2]

In addition, **donor country funding cuts** have destabilised an already-strained humanitarian system. Cuts have reduced food assistance, shut down basic nutrition service providers and contributed to significant data gaps. This has led to the UN's "Humanitarian Reset" aiming to increase efficiency and simplify coordination in the sector.[3]

A concerted investment in addressing hunger, food security and improved nutrition contributes in the long-term to global stability. Doing so requires an integrated, coordinated approach, not a siloed one.



Families gathered for a support group to learn about the infant and young child feeding programs in Torodo Village, Burkina Faso on August 28, 2018. Photo © Dominic Chavez/The Global Financing Facility

Problem Statement

Humanitarian and development actors have spent decades combating global hunger and malnutrition - feeding hungry people in crisis settings, improving yields and livelihoods, and preventing and treating malnutrition. **However, sectors (i.e. nutrition, health, education, WASH, agriculture and livelihoods, social protection, etc.) often operate in silos and in one single system (i.e. humanitarian or development) with limited coordination, accountability, or shared goals.** Despite their best efforts, this siloed approach has led to short-term fixes rather than sustainable solutions that address the root causes of hunger and malnutrition.

Policymakers have traditionally approached nutrition in crises from a treatment-focused lens, concentrating on addressing acute malnutrition through supplementation, therapeutic feeding, and other interventions. At the same time, food security has often been narrowly understood as caloric sufficiency. Today, the biggest drivers of global malnutrition are poor-quality diets, disrupted or fragile food systems, and limited access to safe, affordable, and nutritious foods. **While there have been efforts to consider nutrition and dietary diversity in food aid and agriculture programs, gaps and limitations often result in prioritizing food availability in humanitarian responses, and producing enough calories in development initiatives**.

Fragmented responses contribute to inefficiencies, duplication of effort, and missed opportunities for impact. For example, food production policies may increase yields but not improve nutrition outcomes, and emergency food assistance or malnutrition treatment efforts may save lives without supporting long-term recovery or resilience. Transforming agrifood systems to prioritize nutrition outcomes, equity, and sustainability requires breaking down institutional silos and adopting coherent, multisectoral policies that are responsive to both immediate needs and long-term development goals.

Gender inequality is a critical driver of food insecurity and malnutrition. Women play a central role in food production and child nutrition but face systemic barriers to land, credit, and decision-making. Without addressing these disparities, integrated food and nutrition programs cannot achieve their full impact. **When women are empowered with equal access to resources and decision-making, child and household nutrition outcomes consistently improve. Investments in food and nutrition security are foundational to other development outcomes and have far-reaching positive impacts.** With a full stomach and a nutritious diet, children can grow healthily and go to school and learn; farmers can adapt to changing conditions, contribute to biodiversity, and increase their incomes; and families and communities can have improved health outcomes and be better prepared in the face of future shocks.

This brief urges Canada to adopt integrated programming that treats food security and nutrition as interdependent, enabling Canada to respond more effectively to hunger and malnutrition caused by climate change, conflict, and economic shocks.



Farmers show how conservation agriculture has greatly improved their yields. (Rwanda) Photo © Femi Fadahunsi

The Opportunity – Why Integration Matters

An integrated approach to nutrition and food security addresses some of the root causes of hunger and malnutrition by prioritizing healthy diets across development and humanitarian contexts, rather than focusing solely either on food quantity or nutrition-specific interventions. This provides better value for money, reduces the cost of downstream health interventions and improves the flexibility of resource-use, while bolstering local leadership and resilience at the community level.



Everline Mwikali, member of the Tene ne Tene Village Savings and Loans (VSLA) group. (Kenya) Photo © Samuel Ouma (NCCK)

Diversified farming systems are central to this approach, as they enhance both household income and dietary diversity. Households that grow a variety of nutritious foods are more resilient to lean seasons, climate shocks, market disruptions, and food price volatility. Furthermore, integrating gender equality into food security and nutrition programming ensures that women's roles as farmers and caregivers are fully supported, multiplying the impact of Canadian investments on household resilience and child nutrition.

Integrating local food systems into humanitarian responses reinforces these benefits. Local procurement of diverse foods for food aid reduces reliance on imported staples, supports local economies, and improves dietary diversity. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture can also be embedded in post-crisis recovery programs. These efforts help communities rebuild food systems that are not only more sustainable but also more nutrition-focused, fostering long-term resilience and reducing the risk of returning to pre-crisis vulnerabilities.

Better value for money

Integrated programming delivers better value for money by reducing duplication, improving coordination, and strengthening long-term impact. When sectors such as health, agriculture, social protection (e.g. cash transfers) and education (e.g. school feeding with locally grown and sourced ingredients) align their efforts, they minimize costly redundancies such as running parallel trainings, managing separate supply chains, or hiring duplicative staff. This streamlining not only cuts administrative overhead but also enhances implementation efficiency across the board.

Reduced downstream health interventions

Importantly, integrated approaches also reduce the need for expensive downstream health interventions. By addressing the root causes of hunger and malnutrition through improved access to diverse diets, clean water, sanitation, and social safety nets, we can prevent malnutrition before it occurs, easing pressure on overburdened health systems and reducing future treatment costs. It enables efforts to meet short-term needs while building long-term resilience. This will enable individuals and communities to not only survive, build resilience and thrive. When programming for nutrition, food assistance, and agriculture & food systems transformation in both humanitarian and development contexts are considered together, truly sustainable nutrition and food security is possible - breaking the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition, building capacity and self-sufficiency, and reducing humanitarian needs over time.

Flexible use of resources

In addition, cross-sectoral integration opens the door to pooled or complementary financing, enabling more flexible use of resources and synchronized timelines. This reduces fragmentation and enables programs to align with a holistic, human-centered vision, operate at a larger scale, and deliver greater impact per dollar spent. For policymakers and funders, investing in integrated programs is a cost-effective strategy that maximizes both human and financial returns.

In practice (Case studies)

UNICEF First Foods Africa[4]

UNICEF has begun its 'First Foods Africa' (FFA) initiative, aiming to ensure that good quality, nutritious food is available and affordable for young children across Africa. It focuses on **incentivizing small & medium enterprises to produce nutrient-rich children's foods locally**. There are three main pillars of action:

- Investment: Ensuring food producers who produce local, nutritious food, have access to capital and business advisory services. UNICEF will prioritize working with companies that enforce gender equity and include women in managerial positions.
- Policy: Promoting regional standards of the highest quality and safety for children. Working with governments to include locally produced nutritious first foods into food transfer and voucher policy
- Demand: Developing social behaviour change and marketing strategies to counter perceptions of mistrust around locally produced foods for children

Foodgrains Bank Humanitarian, Early Recovery and Development (HERD) program[5]

Between 2021 and 2023, Foodgrains Bank implemented an integrated program aimed at **providing access to food while supporting people's efforts to build more resilient food security**. Key pillars of the programming were:

- Food assistance: Provision of cash or in-kind food assistance that aimed to improve participants' food consumption score and nutritional quality.
- Early Recovery and Development activities aimed at training participants, mainly women on conservation agriculture techniques using gender sensitive principles to improve yield and diversify their diets through the introduction of livestock and vegetables to improve dietary diversity.

A key result from this programming was that even after food assistance had ended, acceptable food consumption scores had doubled. Participants reported not only improved access to food but nutritious food.

Nutrition International - Large scale food fortification and social safety net programs integration in Bangladesh[6]

Nutrition International works closely with WFP to provide technical assistance to the Government of Bangladesh and industry, enabling the fortification of rice distributed through two of the country's largest social safety net programs. **By adding six essential vitamins and minerals to a staple food that millions already rely on, the program improves diet quality without changing eating habits or increasing costs**. The program reaches 15 million. There are three main pillars of action:

- Technical assistance: Supporting government and industry to set policy direction, strengthen capacity, and maintain quality, needs based fortification standards.
- Quality assurance: Training millers in blending techniques and monitoring processes to ensure fortified rice meets national fortification standards and quality parameters.
- Integration: Helping the government incorporate fortified rice into social safety net programs as a complementary approach to improve the nutrition of the most vulnerable.



Khin Myo feeds her baby a nutritious meal mixed with Multiple Micronutrient Powder, supporting her child's growth and development. Photo © UNICEF/UNI725964/Oo

Challenges

Institution-level: Breaking down silos and building cross-sector expertise

- **Existing structures and mandates often reinforce separation between sectors.** Strengthening coordination within GAC and with diverse civil society partners and coalitions, alongside investing in cross-sector training, is essential to develop policies that can bridge sectoral programming – such as agriculture and nutrition – in humanitarian and development contexts.

Programming: Aligning programming and funding for impact

- **Traditional approaches often prioritize calorie quantity or emergency rations over nutritional quality and dietary diversity**. To truly improve food and nutrition outcomes, programming must balance life-saving needs, agricultural productivity, and the nutritional value of what is produced and consumed, ensuring that all sectors work toward shared goals of health and resilience.

- **Effective integration requires shared metrics, joint outcomes, and multi-disciplinary teams—but fragmented funding often discourages collaboration among potential sector partners**. Rethinking program design and financing models to incentivize cross-sector planning is key to greater efficiency, equity, and long-term impact.



A rice fortification blending facility combines fortified rice kernels with non-fortified rice in the regulated ratio. Here, the rice is arriving to be blended. Photo © Nutrition International

Recommendations

1. Adopt a Food Systems Lens

- Align foreign aid strategies across sectors, including but not limited to agriculture, health, and nutrition, in humanitarian and development contexts, in line with GAC's Resilient Agri-Food Systems Framework. This means breaking down institutional silos, investing in cross-sector expertise, and designing programs and funding models that prioritize shared outcomes.

2. Fund Integrated, Flexible, Multi-Sectoral Mechanisms

- Prioritize flexible, multi-sectoral funding mechanisms to enable rapid, needs-based allocation across sectors and contexts by preparing for future shocks, responding quickly, and ensuring equitable, needs based responses. Together with this, it is essential to maintain Canada's commitment to women and girls by ensuring that these investments continue to integrate gender analysis, set clear targets for women's participation and leadership, and report on gender equality outcomes.

3. Champion Global Leadership

- Use its diplomatic influence to encourage countries in multilateral forums - leveraging Canada's G7 leadership and the G20 Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty - to adopt coherent, multisectoral policies linking sectors, including but not limited to agriculture, health, and nutrition, in humanitarian and development contexts. This would help shape global standards, foster policy alignment, and accelerate progress toward zero hunger, while reinforcing Canada's leadership in sustainable development.

SIGNATORIES

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