

The global food system is broken. It needs to be reformed to tackle hunger, build resilience and protect our common home

Introduction

“If we are to guarantee the fundamental right to an adequate standard of living and meet our commitments to achieve Zero Hunger, it is not enough to produce food. We need a new mindset and a new holistic approach... food systems that protect the Earth and keep the dignity of the human person at the centre; that ensure enough food globally and promote decent work locally; and that feed the world today, without compromising the future.”

(Pope Francis, Rome, 27 July 2021)

East Africa has suffered four failed harvests and the worst drought for 40 years, resulting in [50 million people at risk of acute food insecurity](#) this year.

In a devastating hunger crisis, the priority is to save lives. We need immediate action to get food to those in most need and at risk of malnutrition or starvation. CAFOD is supporting local experts from our Church network to deliver emergency food and water to help people survive in Kenya, Ethiopia and South Sudan.

However, we cannot and must not limit the response to immediate action, which is why [CAFOD is campaigning to fix the food system](#).

The tragedy is that the [current crisis in East Africa could have – and should have - been avoided](#), both through early action in response to warning signs of impending famine and through addressing systemic failures in the global food system that increase the risks of future crises.

[The warnings were there, just as the warnings were there in 2011](#), when governments and the UN committed to end extreme hunger by “Never Again” ignoring signs of famine.

“To tackle the root causes of this current hunger crisis we need to avoid the same story year after year: of crop failures, livestock deaths and human suffering, leading to emergency intervention.”

(Bishop Peter Kihara Kariuki, Marsabit, Northern Kenya)

The same failed responses to repeated crises

In responding to the current humanitarian crisis, we should learn from previous responses and not allow the same mistakes to be repeated.

The [proposed solutions to the current crisis](#), such as a rush to new supplies of chemical fertilizers, increased global trade through long, precarious supply chains, and an ongoing focus on a few staple crops, could make things worse for the future.

These are [more of the same actions that have been tried after previous crises](#) and risk further entrenching a food system that isn't working for the world's poorest people or for the planet. They will [not make the food system more resilient to repeated shocks](#) such as conflict, pandemics and climate change. They will not tackle global hunger or put people in control of producing enough nutritious food for themselves and their families.

Despite [enough food being produced for everyone in the world](#) we are experiencing the [third global food crisis in 15 years](#), with [828 million people hungry in 2021](#), an increase of 150 million since 2019, a greater proportion of whom are women. [The key issue is not the amount of food, but people's access to food](#) as they often can't afford it due to low incomes and high prices.

This crisis has followed a [similar pattern to the previous two crises](#), with spikes in energy prices leading to increased fertilizer prices and higher food prices.

These crises show the fragility of the global food system. Food crises are so frequent that the World Food Programme is providing emergency food aid on an almost permanent basis.

Something needs to change.

The problem with a narrow focus on production

"It is not enough to balance, in the medium term, the protection of nature with financial gain, or the preservation of the environment with progress. ... it is a matter of redefining our notion of progress. A technological and economic development which does not leave in its wake a better world and an integrally higher quality of life cannot be considered progress."

(Pope Francis, Laudato Si, #194, 2015)

At the heart of the problem is the industrialised food system based on a model that has a focus on [increased production as the main measure of success](#). This model produces vast amounts of food and huge profits for some, but at huge cost to others.

Countries in the global south that are reliant on the import and export of a few staple crops such as wheat, maize and rice, are vulnerable to fluctuating prices on global markets. This is a legacy of [agricultural export models established under colonialism](#) and entrenched through the Green Revolution. It is particularly a problem when harvests of staple crops fail and [countries become dependent on imports to feed their populations](#), which is precisely what is unfolding in East Africa.

This trade-oriented model is designed to maximise crop production, with scant regard to the diversity and quality of food, where it is produced, who has access to it and even what it is used for. This [model further marginalises women](#), who are often excluded from commercial activities, whose indigenous and traditional knowledge is often undervalued, and who are more vulnerable to land grabs.

In the context of lack of access to food for millions of people, it is [an injustice that only 55% of the world's crop calories are used directly for food](#), while 45% are used to produce biofuels, animal feed and other products, rather than feeding people.

This food system [reduces choice and does not provide nutritious food for all](#) - with the predominant focus being on fats, sugars and grains instead of a more varied diet that includes fruits, vegetables and proteins. It is estimated that [close to three-quarters of agricultural crop diversity has disappeared over the last century](#), increasing reliance on a limited range of crops and reducing nutritional diversity.

This model is also [highly vulnerable to shocks](#) that disrupt global supply chains, such as conflict, covid and the impacts of climate change, which result in millions of people unable to afford enough nutritious food to feed themselves and their families.

It is too reliant on [production techniques that pollute soils, water and the atmosphere](#), including a global dependence on fossil-fuel based chemical fertilizers, that further exacerbate climate change risks. The food system is responsible for an estimated [80% of deforestation in some parts of the world](#) and a [third of greenhouse gas emissions](#). In turn, the poorest people who have contributed the least to climate change are those who suffer worst, through [reduction of crop yields, destruction of lands and livelihoods](#).

"Between 2008 and 2018, the impacts of natural disasters cost the agricultural sectors of developing country economies over USD 108 billion in damaged or lost crop and livestock production. Such damage can be particularly detrimental to livelihoods of smallholder and subsistence farmers, pastoralists, and fishers." (FAO, 2021)

Power in the hands of fewer and fewer companies

[Large agribusiness corporations hold huge power](#) in global food markets, leaving farmers with very little control over what they grow and sell, and at what price. The biggest ten agricultural commodity traders hold around 40% of the global market and the largest six companies control 58% of the global commercial seed market. This gives them [disproportionate power to affect market prices](#). It is estimated that [agribusinesses own the 1% of farms that control around 70% of agricultural land](#).

[Agricultural subsidies totalling billions of pounds each year reinforce this model](#) and consolidate the control that large agribusiness companies have over the production, processing, distribution and sales of crops.

This [concentration of power is further locked in through national and international seed laws](#) that increasingly make it [illegal for local communities to exchange, grow and distribute seeds](#) that they have been developing for generations. Local farmers are increasingly reliant on buying seeds from large companies and lose control over what they can grow and how they manage their land and plans for the future.

"In concentrated sectors such as seeds and agrochemicals, the firms that hold the most market share have tended to... invest in innovation pathways that are good for their own bottom lines, rather than developing more accessible and low-cost technologies for the world's farmers, especially small-scale producers in the developing world." (Nature, 2021)

Vision of a world with enough food for all

The failings of the current food system fall disproportionately on the poorest and most vulnerable people in our communities, especially women, both in the UK and in countries where CAFOD works around the world.

This compels us to challenge the fundamental injustices underpinning how the global food system operates. We work in solidarity and partnership with our brothers and sisters around the world to strive for the world we want.

Our vision is inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, which recognises the inherent dignity and value of every human being and is rooted in principles of equity and justice.

CAFOD's vision is for food systems that provide enough nutritious food for all, in harmony with the environment.

Where farmers and local communities have control over their land and livelihoods and can make decisions about their future, ensuring their needs and rights are respected.

Systems that celebrate crop diversity, local cultures and farming techniques, build resilience, and protect communities against future shocks.

That operate in the interests of the common good to promote human flourishing for men and women, tackle climate change and protect the environment.

The good news - we know what works

Around the world, [people are working together to build local food systems](#) operating alongside intensified industrial agriculture.

These food systems are rooted in agroecology - the application of ecological principles to agricultural production. Agroecological practices aim to build resilient, diverse and productive agroecosystems, at the same time as building socially equitable food systems and enabling people to exercise choice over what they eat, and how and where it is produced.

In these communities, farmers are at the centre of decision-making about what to grow, how and who for. They build on their deep knowledge of their own environments and social contexts, growing nutritious food, protecting their natural resources and their cultural heritage, at the same time as strengthening their local economies.

These [agroecological approaches are increasingly showing higher yields compared with conventional methods, as well as improved soil health and biodiversity](#).

“The capacity of diversified agroecological systems to sustain yields, limit losses and enable recovery in the face of environmental stresses and shocks has been documented in a variety of settings. In particular, diversified systems have shown the capacity to raise productivity in the places where additional food is desperately needed.”

Yet these approaches receive very little support from governments and donors. Just [4% of the UK aid budget goes to agriculture](#) and [less than 5% of that amount goes to agroecological approaches](#). If we are to transform the food system, we need to radically shift where money flows.

We need to transform the global food system. Change takes time

We need to transform the food system with the same urgency as we are transforming the energy system.

The problem is not the amount of food produced, but what food is produced, who it is produced for, who has access to this food and who profits. If we are to avoid future global food crises, we need solutions that are fit for purpose in an era of climate change, pandemics and environmental destruction.

We need to reduce damaging production methods and increase the use of agroecological practices.

[Yet change takes time](#). Listening to the many farmers already successfully using agroecology we know such shifts cannot be done overnight and can take several years.

It will take time for degraded agricultural land to recover. There will need to be more investment to support farmers as they reduce the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and similar inputs so that they can use diverse and resilient seed varieties to produce the quantity and quality of food that people need.

Support will be needed to further develop local markets, secure land rights and establish laws that respect farmers' rights to grow and share their own seeds.

What can governments and international institutions do now?

Immediate emergency aid is a priority to respond to the East Africa food crisis, and greater attention to early warning and early action, as well as supporting communities to build resilience to withstand future crises.

But short-term responses must align with longer-term actions needed to reform the food system, address food insecurity and build local economies that are better able to withstand future shocks.

We need significant shifts in policies, subsidies, finance, trade and consumption patterns to increasingly support local, diverse, resilient systems that provide nutritious food for everyone.

Instead of relying on food aid to avert future crisis, or [short-term fixes that entrench current food production models](#), we need to move towards a diverse food system where greater long-term food security is achieved through increased resilience. We need to:

1. **Put the needs and voices of farmers at the centre of the food system.** Farmers – including women farmers – local communities, Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists and fisherfolk should be able to participate fully in decisions that affect their own lands and livelihoods at the local level and in global governance of the food system.
2. **Redefine how we measure success.** It is time to move beyond a narrow obsession with food production based around hybrid seeds and chemical fertilizer. Instead, success should be defined based on indicators of human flourishing, such as decrease in hunger levels, access to nutritionally and culturally appropriate food, improved farmers' incomes and sustainable livelihoods, secure land rights, improved biodiversity and women's participation.
3. **Break dependency on fossil fuel-based fertilizers.** Governments and donors need to review all current agricultural projects and programmes and repurpose finance away from chemical fertilizers towards sustainable local food systems.
4. **Scale up investment in an agroecological transition with the same urgency and scale as the energy transition.** Shift public finance towards agroecological approaches that focus on the production of diverse nutritious crops, grown in harmony with the environment and resilient to climate change, support local markets and supply chains, and secure land rights.
5. **Reduce the concentration and abuse of power of large-scale agribusiness.** This will include limiting excessive speculation on food commodities in times of crisis, preventing companies from stockpiling and artificially inflating food prices, and changing laws that restrict farmers from saving their own seeds.

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