

Building Resilient Food Systems: Lessons from GAFSP projects

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Haiti's PARAGA project assisted Elisée Elitane of Bois Neuf Malor to improve her cultivation of yam and banana. PHOTO: COSADH

Introduction

Food systems across the globe are facing intensifying and overlapping shocks that threaten food security, nutrition, livelihoods and environmental sustainability. This year, the United Nations Committee on World Food Security (CFS) is negotiating on a policy convergence process where UN nations will agree on the policies needed to build food systems that are resilient to global and regional crises. The CFS's High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) has released its report *Building Resilient Food Systems*, which identifies climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, conflict, pandemics, market volatility, debt crises and widening inequalities as interacting stresses that increasingly undermine the ability of food systems to ensure food security and nutrition for all.¹ The report argues that resilience cannot simply mean "bouncing back" to previous

conditions after crises; instead, food systems need to "bounce forward" to achieve what the HLPE terms "equitably transformative resilience," meaning systems capable of adapting and transforming while reducing structural inequalities and strengthening ecological sustainability.

The HLPE report emphasises that shocks rarely occur in isolation. Climate variability interacts with poverty, weak infrastructure, fragile governance, conflict and exclusion from markets to produce cascading vulnerabilities, particularly for smallholder farmers, women, Indigenous Peoples and marginalised rural communities. Increasingly, rainfall irregularity, flooding, drought, pandemics, food-price spikes, supply-chain disruptions and violent conflict are reducing agricultural productivity and exacerbating food insecurity in many regions. In fragile contexts, crises disrupt not only production but also transport systems, local markets, financial services, extension systems and social cohesion.

Civil society and Indigenous Peoples participating in the CFS are also proposing policy priorities for the resilient food systems convergence process. As participants in the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples' Mechanism (CSIPM) for CFS, we concur with the CSIPM position that resilience must be rooted in human rights, local food sovereignty and the agency of rights-holders rather than narrowly technocratic approaches.² Resilient food systems require strengthening territorial markets, protecting access to land and seeds, using an agroecological approach that values and supports Indigenous, traditional and local knowledge systems, in dialogue with scientific knowledge such as ecology. It also requires decentralising governance and confronting structural inequalities and corporate concentration within food systems. Marginalised groups—including peasants, Indigenous Peoples, fisherfolk, women, youth and gender-diverse people—must be central actors in defining and implementing resilience strategies.

Taken together, the HLPE and CSIPM emphasise the following key policy directions for building resilient food systems:

- strengthening diversified agroecological production systems;
- investing in local and territorial markets;
- strengthening producer organisations and community institutions;
- improving access to social protection mechanisms and finance that does not build indebtedness;
- supporting women's agency and inclusive governance;
- strengthening local seed systems and biodiversity;
- investing in storage, processing and transport infrastructure;
- supporting nutrition-sensitive agriculture;
- integrating humanitarian, development and peacebuilding approaches in fragile contexts;
- ensuring long-term, predictable, locally-grounded financing rather than short-term project cycles.
- protecting the rights of producers and all people involved in building resilient food systems, including the specific rights of Indigenous Peoples.

This policy brief is informed by reviews of projects across seven countries, funded by the Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP), which sought to identify important practical lessons on strengthening resilient food systems in highly vulnerable contexts across Africa, Asia and the Caribbean.³ The reviews were conducted by the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP, consisting of ActionAid International, the Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF), the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRA) and Coordination pour des Actions en Santé et en Développement d'Haïti (COSADH).

The GAFSP: Innovative support for producers' organisations and for government services to smallholders

The multi-lateral Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) was established by the G20 in 2010, as part of a wave of measures responding to the 2007-2008 food price crisis. GAFSP has two distinct focus areas: (i) food system outcomes, including increased agricultural productivity, improved farm-to-market linkages, reduced risk and vulnerability, improved rural livelihoods and entrepreneurship and improved institutions; and (ii) cross-cutting outcomes, including improved climate resilience, empowered women and girls, and improved nutrition.

While the bulk of GAFSP funding has gone to strengthen government initiatives and services that support smallholder agriculture, in 2016 the GAFSP piloted grants going directly to smallholder producer organisations (POs). Following the positive outcomes of the initial PO led projects, in 2019, GAFSP was restructured into two tracts: a grant-based Financing Track (GBFT), which allocates grants to countries and POs and a public private partnership-led funding track, which provides both grants and concessional funding through the Business Investment Financing Track (BIFT).

Building resilient food systems is important for all countries, especially in the face of climate change and growing inequality within countries. Building resilient food systems is crucial to GAFSP's mission of strengthening food and nutrition security in the world's poorest countries. Of 55 countries that have received GAFSP support, 32 countries are designated as fragile or conflict-affected situations (FCS), which are especially in need of resilience building. In 2019 GAFSP launched its first call for proposals exclusively for FCS countries. With US\$ 1.1 billion in funding going to 73 FCS grant interventions so far, FCS countries account for 60% of the total value of the GAFSP portfolio.⁴

GAFSP Projects Reviewed

Burundi – COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Project

Implemented by the Confédération des Associations des Producteurs Agricoles pour le Développement (CAPAD), with support from IFAD, the project supports recovery from severe COVID-19-related disruptions affecting banana and bean value chains, food security and rural livelihoods. The intervention focuses on cooperative strengthening, improved crop varieties, processing infrastructure and collective marketing systems.⁵

Cambodia – Building Back Better: Organic Agriculture for Smallholder Farmers

Implemented by the Cambodian Agriculture Cooperative Corporation (CACC) with WFP as supervising entity, the project is promoting organic and agroecological farming systems among smallholders and Indigenous Peoples in Monduliri Province. It responds to poverty, climate

vulnerability, weak market access, malnutrition and gender inequality.⁶

Democratic Republic of Congo – Resilience and Nutrition in the Great Lakes Region & Multisectoral Nutrition and Health Projects (MNHP)

Implemented through FAO and the World Bank in South Kivu and Tanganyika, the project addresses food insecurity, conflict, malnutrition, displacement and weak rural infrastructure through nutrition-sensitive agriculture, financial inclusion and social cohesion mechanisms.⁷

Haiti – Promotion of Resilient Agriculture through Agroforestry

Implemented by the farmers' organisation ROPAGA and ActionAid Haiti with WFP supervision, the project supports recovery from the 2021 earthquake while strengthening agroforestry systems, climate resilience and producer organisations in Grand'Anse.⁸

Liberia – Smallholder Agriculture Development for Food and Nutrition Security

Implemented through Liberia's Ministry of Agriculture with support from FAO, WFP and CARI, the project has strengthened productivity, seed systems and nutrition-sensitive agriculture. The project aims to build institutional procurement systems linking smallholders to school feeding programmes.⁹

Lao PDR – Agriculture for Nutrition Phase II

Implemented through the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry with IFAD and WFP supervision, the project is addressing poverty, malnutrition, weak market access and climate vulnerability in remote upland communities through nutrition-sensitive agriculture and cooperative strengthening.¹⁰

Tanzania – Baridi Sokoni

Implemented by MVIWATA with AfDB supervision, the project is strengthening horticulture, spice, potato and bean value chains while promoting agroecological production systems, market coordination and improved storage infrastructure.¹¹

Diversified Agroecological Production Systems as Foundations of Resilience

One of the strongest lessons emerging from the reviewed projects is that diversified agroecological production systems strengthen resilience more effectively than narrowly production-focused interventions.¹² The HLPE report highlights diversification as central to resilient food systems because it reduces dependence on single commodities, strengthens biodiversity and improves adaptive capacity under climate stress.

The project in Lao PDR promotes the cultivation of a diversity of foods both for home consumption and the market. Crop diversity is being achieved through a variety of agroecological practices including intercropping, mixed cropping and relay, furthermore efforts to preserve and create biodiversity involve the valuing of wild foods that most households collect and experimentation in cultivating these foods.

Haiti's PARAGA project supports agroecological agroforestry systems, integrating fruit trees, tubers, beekeeping and diversified crop production following earthquake-related disruptions. Agroforestry has simultaneously improved soil conservation, diversified incomes, strengthened climate adaptation and reduced pressure on forests linked to charcoal production.

In Tanzania, diversified production systems involving spices, beans, potatoes and horticultural crops have reduced dependence on single-value chains while strengthening nutrition and soil fertility. Beans are particularly important because of their role in nitrogen fixation and household protein consumption.

The Cambodia project, which has promoted organic and agroecological farming systems, diversified production, reduced chemical dependence and cooperative-led value chains, has strengthened both ecological sustainability and household resilience in remote communities of Indigenous Peoples vulnerable to climate variability.

While agroecology is crucial for building resilient food systems, not all the reviewed GAFSP projects emphasise agroecological goals and methods. For example, in Liberia, while the national agroecology strategy is referenced within broader agricultural policy frameworks, the project itself remained more focused on short term productivity and staple crop commercialisation than on diversified and socially just agroecological transition. This leaves food systems vulnerable to shocks and may fail to address growing inequalities.

Strengthening Producer Organisations and Local Institutions

The HLPE report and CSIPM policy recommendations emphasise that resilient food systems depend on strong local institutions, producer organisations and participatory governance systems.

Across the reviewed portfolio, projects that worked through and supported farmer organisations and integrated support from CSOs, generally achieved stronger resilience outcomes. Across the seven projects, where local farmers and CSOs are involved in the governance, design, implementation and monitoring, there is a greater sense of ownership, allowing issues to be flagged and resolved more timeously and appropriately.

For example, In Burundi, cooperatives participated in needs assessments and beneficiary selection as well as choice of the crops and the areas to place the farmer field schools, ensuring inclusivity and local relevance. While in Lao PDR, participatory planning and multi-sectoral platforms bring together government, civil society, private sector and farmers to plan activities and align efforts.

In Burundi, Cambodia, Haiti and Tanzania, local level project steering committees oversee implementation and monitoring. Farmers groups also contribute data, feedback and reflections through regular review meetings, joint field monitoring and community-level assessments, assessing results and identifying challenges and lessons learned, ensuring accountability and timely improvement.

CAPAD cooperatives in Burundi strengthened collective marketing, input access and processing infrastructure while reducing individual farmer risks during post-pandemic recovery.

The Cambodia project strengthened agricultural cooperatives members of CACC as platforms for training, marketing, nutrition education and climate adaptation. Women constituted a large majority of participants, with many taking up leadership positions in the cooperatives, reinforcing the role of producer organisations in gender-inclusive resilience building.

In Haiti, strengthening ROPAGA itself was a central project objective. The project recognised that resilient food systems require durable local institutions capable of coordinating markets, training and farmer support beyond the lifespan of external funding.

Local groups can also act as governance platforms to strengthen peace and cohesion – they become the ‘resilience floor’ in the face of conflict. The project review in the DRC emphasised that community institutions became particularly important under conflict conditions. The project supported Dimitra Clubs to provide neutral spaces for conflict mediation and building social cohesion between communities facing land tensions and insecurity. Similarly, local grievance redress committees in Liberia function as key platforms for conflict resolution, accountability and continuity during crises.



Members of the Dimitra Club in Kawama, Tanganyika.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID DRC

Resilience in Fragile Contexts: **Lessons from Eastern DRC**

Clear lessons on resilience emerge from the eastern DRC project review and a set of policy recommendations made by ActionAid DRC.¹³

The interventions in the DRC explicitly recognised that agricultural resilience in fragile settings cannot be separated from peacebuilding, financial inclusion and social cohesion. The projects operated in territories affected by armed conflict, displacement, land disputes, infrastructure collapse and chronic food insecurity.

Three mechanisms were particularly important:

Farmer Field Schools

Farmer field schools improved yields through spacing techniques, organic inputs, diversified cropping and biofortified seeds. Farmers moved from monocropping toward more diversified production systems better able to absorb shocks.

Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs)

VSLAs were identified as among the strongest resilience mechanisms in the project. This model demonstrates an effective approach to ring-fencing funds to ensure that women benefit. Savings and small loans financed school fees, health emergencies and small enterprises while strengthening women's economic agency and reducing dependence on exploitative informal credit systems.

Financial inclusion through community-led groups strengthens resilience and cohesion, particularly in contexts with limited formal banking infrastructure. By reducing financial stress, especially during periods of climate and market shocks, such efforts also reduce household and community conflict and promote cohesion. Any initiatives that provide credit, however, should also ensure capacity building for financial literacy to manage debt risk for farmers.

Dimitra Clubs

Dimitra Clubs (community listening clubs), a form of organisation originally promoted by the FAO, proved foundational for social cohesion and conflict mediation in project communities. In Tanganyika, they facilitated dialogue between Bantu and Batwa communities; in South Kivu, they mediated farmer-herder disputes, reducing retaliatory violence and crop destruction.

The DRC experience also exposed important weaknesses in the project. Increased production did not reliably translate into higher incomes because insecurity and poor roads prevented farmers from reaching markets. Abrupt interruptions in project financing created what the policy brief calls "trust shocks," undermining resilience gains when promised financial support failed to materialise.

Perhaps most importantly, the DRC review demonstrates that local civil society organisations functioned as "resilience anchors" during periods when international actors evacuated because of insecurity. This has major implications for future project financing in fragile contexts. Project implementers must be responsive to local conditions and local partners. They must not only be prepared to navigate climate shocks, national inflation and global price fluctuations, fuel and power shortages, poor road infrastructure and security risks on transportation routes, but also, in the case of the DRC, hostile action by armed groups.

Territorial Markets, Storage and Market Resilience

Both HLPE and CSIPM emphasise that resilient food systems require diversified territorial markets rather than excessive dependence on globalised commodity systems vulnerable to disruption.

Tanzania's Baridi Sokoni project demonstrated the importance of storage, aggregation and market coordination systems. Investments in drying, storage and market infrastructure reduced post-harvest losses and improved farmers' bargaining power within spice and potato value chains.

Projects in Haiti, Burundi and Liberia link producer organisations to institutional procurement systems supplying school feeding programmes (although this is yet to be implemented in Liberia). This creates more stable local demand while strengthening territorial food systems and improving nutrition outcomes.

However, market vulnerabilities remained significant across projects. In Cambodia, the review recommended market diversification to reduce dependency on single buyers or a distant market for commodities. In the DRC, where insecurity and transport constraints limit market access, further investment in organised collection points or establishment of cooperatives to increase bargaining power is needed. In Tanzania, price volatility and reliance on middlemen continued limiting farmers' income despite project support. And in Haiti, the producer organisation ROPAGA has improved market access for local farmers' groups, but this access is fragile. Producers also require adequate storage facilities, contracts or partnerships with multiple buyers.

Nutrition-Sensitive Agriculture and Resilience

Several projects demonstrated that resilience depends not only on yields but also on dietary diversity and nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

In Lao PDR and Cambodia, projects integrated agriculture, livestock systems, nutrition education and cooperative or agriculture group development in remote communities experiencing severe malnutrition and poverty.

In Burundi, nutritious bean varieties and improved banana systems strengthened both incomes and household nutrition. In DRC, nutrition-sensitive agriculture was integrated directly into resilience programming. Health centres are functioning as convergence points for identification of malnourished children and connecting their families to nutrition education and access to seeds and training for nutritious crops. This creates a direct link between clinical health assessments and support for agricultural production and nutrition.

These projects reinforce HLPE findings that resilient food systems require integration of production, nutrition and social dimensions rather than narrow productivity targets.

Gender, Inclusion and Differential Vulnerabilities

The HLPE report emphasises that vulnerabilities within food systems are highly unequal and shaped by gender, ethnicity, poverty and geography.

Women were disproportionately affected by COVID-related market disruptions in Burundi. Indigenous Peoples in remote Cambodia faced exclusion from markets and services. Ethnic minority and remote upland communities in Lao PDR experienced overlapping poverty, malnutrition and infrastructure deficits.

Projects that combined financial inclusion, producer organisations and participatory governance generally performed best in strengthening resilience among marginalised groups.

Reviews by the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP found that some projects could have benefitted from more attention to structural issues, such as inequitable land-tenure, especially for women. To ensure long-term transformative impact, projects require strong grassroots community participation in government policymaking and in the governance of lead producer organisations. The project in Lao PDR provides a positive example of participatory governance through support of district-level nutrition councils that influence decision-making at the provincial and national levels of government, by exchanging information and plans.

Recommendations

International donors should prioritise support for projects that:

- strengthen diversified agroecological production systems
- support territorial and local market systems
- focus on addressing household nutrition through agroecology
- combine agricultural investment with financial inclusion and social cohesion mechanisms
- strengthen producer organisations and local civil society institutions
- support women's leadership and inclusive governance
- invest in storage, transport and processing infrastructure
- integrate humanitarian-development-peacebuilding approaches in fragile contexts
- provide predictable, long-term financing to producer organisations rather than short-term project cycles.

Governments should:

- strengthen public investment in agroecology and diversified farming systems
- legally recognise and support territorial food markets and local food governance systems
- strengthen extension systems grounded in participatory farmer learning
- expand rural infrastructure including roads, storage, irrigation and market facilities
- support local seed systems and biodiversity conservation
- strengthen nutrition-sensitive agriculture policies
- integrate social protection and rural finance systems into resilience strategies
- strengthen land rights and inclusive governance for women, Indigenous Peoples and marginalised communities
- support long-term partnerships with local producer organisations and CSOs.

Building resilient food systems requires moving beyond production-focused approaches toward integrated systems that strengthen ecological sustainability, local institutions, social cohesion and equitable livelihoods under conditions of growing uncertainty.

Endnotes

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