

# Policy Brief: Africa and Food Security

OCTOBER 2021

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**Suggested Citation:** Cochrane, L., Lemma, M. D., Ojong, N. and Sambu, W.C. (2021), Policy Brief: Africa and Food Security. United Nations, Office of the Special Adviser on Africa.

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## Acknowledgments

This policy brief builds on the [pre-recorded Conversation](#) on Food Security and Famine Prevention in Africa, moderated by [Alex Awiti](#) (Aga Khan University, Pakistan, and University of the Fraser Valley, Canada) with the following discussants: [Logan Cochrane](#) (Hamad bin Khalifa University, Qatar, Carleton University, Canada, and Hawassa University, Ethiopia); [Melisew Dejene Lemma](#) (Hawassa University, Ethiopia); [Nathanael Ojong](#) (York University, Canada); [Winnie Sambu](#) (World Bicycle Relief and University of Cape Town, South Africa). The ideas in this policy brief have been informed by the ongoing research

and experience of the experts in their individual capacities and contribution to the Knowledge Network of the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), which was launched on 29 June 2021. The OSAA Knowledge Network creates a platform for the Office to engage with academics, experts and think tanks through a win-win partnership, and seeks to bring visibility to the work of the experts on the global stage. The knowledge products will be used by the Office to help to enhance our advocacy on African priorities, as articulated in the African Union's Agenda 2063 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

## Executive summary

As United Nations Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, noted at the 2021 Africa Regional Food Systems Summit Dialogue, food insecurity is rising in many African countries (see 13 July 2021 address). The global pandemic has not only put global health inequality on display; it has also done the same for food security: nearly one out of five Africans experienced hunger in 2020 – more than double the proportion of any other region. This policy brief highlights the current situation, noting countries with a high prevalence of food insecurity as well as countries where large numbers of people experience hunger. We note the impact of the COVID-19

pandemic on food security as well as the negative consequences of food insecurity from a nutritional perspective. Before looking forward, this policy brief examines the historical context of social policies and safety nets, using a selection of contemporary case studies. It concludes with recommendations for protecting the right to food for all people at all times (e.g., investing in better data, best fit design, expanding coverage, moving beyond quantity to quality, nutritional diversity and food safety) as well as enabling food system change (e.g., enhancing resilience, transforming systems).



Children in Popokabaka village, Bandundu Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). According to the World Food Programme (WFP), by October 2021, an estimated **3.3 million** children in the country were acutely malnourished, according to the World Food Programme (WFP). Credit: OCHA Gemma Cortes.

## Situational assessment

The 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 2 aim to eliminate hunger and achieve food security for all people, at all times, so that everyone has physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life (read more about food security [here](#)). However, African countries are not on track to meet this objective. Before the pandemic, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reported that more than 250 million Africans were food insecure and that this figure was rising (FAO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the food security situation, due to economic slowdowns, rising unemployment and loss of income, as well as disrupted global supply chains. The full impact of the pandemic is not yet known (see box 1 for more details).

Food security is defined and measured in many ways. Two macro-level data sets highlight the situation across the continent: (1) prevalence of undernourishment, which shows the severity within a nation (Figure 1); and (2) the number of people who are undernourished, which is often linked to population size, but highlights the scale of the challenges faced in some countries (Table 1). The prevalence of food insecurity is extremely high in nine countries, where more than 50 per cent of the population is undernourished (namely, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Somalia and South Sudan) (Figure 1).

According to the Institute for Security Studies and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project ([ACLEL](#)), many of these nations have experienced conflict during the last decade. The role



Agnes Mambu harvesting sesame in Popokabaka, Bandundu province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to WFP, in October 2021, the country faced the largest hunger crisis in the world in absolute numbers. Credit: OCHA, Niels Stassyns.

### BOX 1. COVID-19 IMPACTS

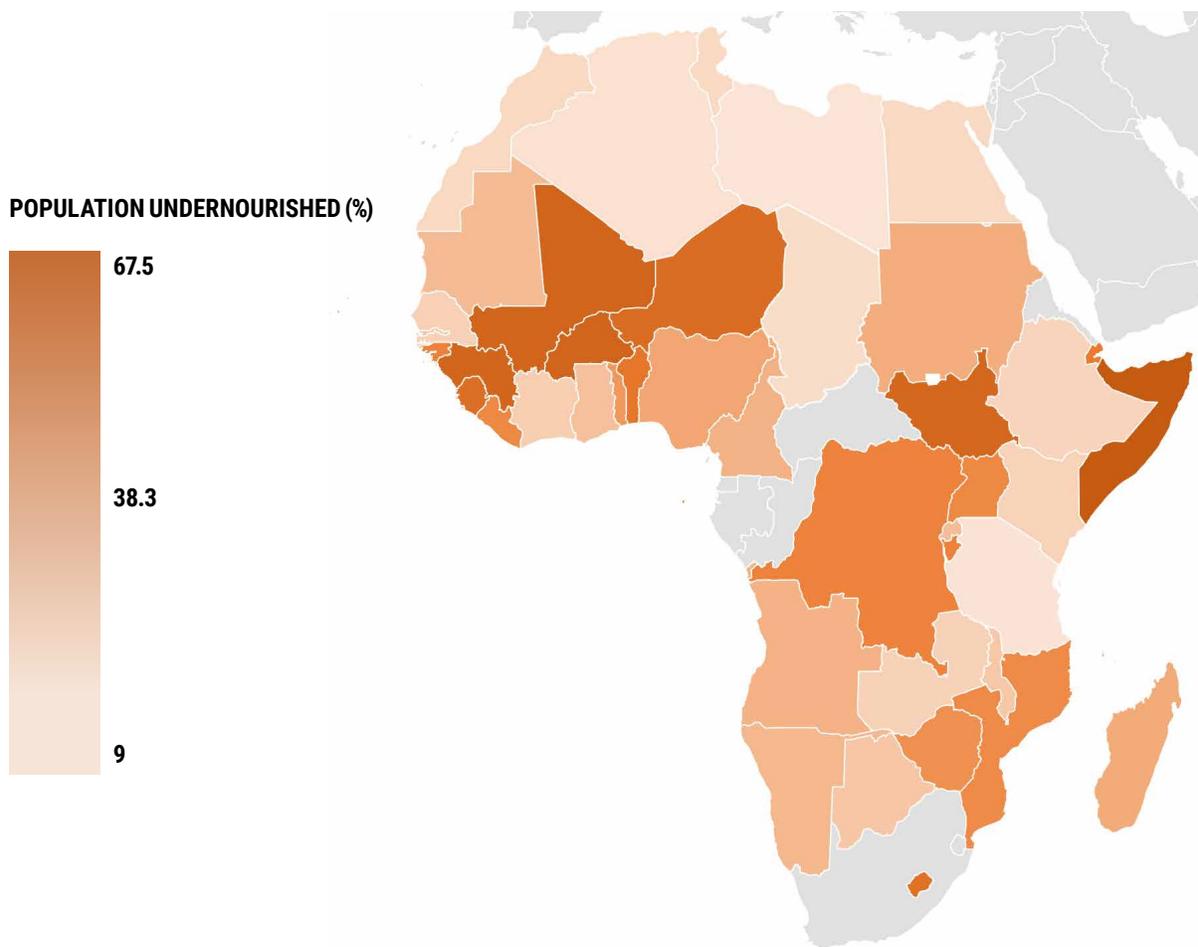
One of the most notable impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its containment measures has been disruptions in food systems across the continent, from production and supply to distribution and consumption. Travel restrictions, curfew hours and bans on gatherings, implemented particularly in the initial months of the pandemic, affected labour supply, access to agricultural inputs and supply of agricultural produce to markets. The resultant impacts included increased food losses and reductions in income levels for both large- and small-scale food

producers. The agricultural sector is a significant contributor to GDP for many African countries, and an important source of livelihoods for the majority of Africa's population, particularly those living in rural areas. As a result of the pandemic, many countries have recorded increases in unemployment levels and income losses among those relying directly or indirectly on the food value chain as a source of livelihood. Declines in sales, compared to pre-pandemic periods, have been reported by small- and medium-size enterprises operating in the agri-food industry.

of conflict as a key driver of food insecurity aligns with research by Alex de Waal, who finds that extreme food insecurity events are connected to atrocities (conflict as well as political/military decisions). Many of the countries with a high prevalence of undernourishment are encountering multiple challenges, including weak governance systems. In addition to this, FAO also highlights climate extremes and economic factors as significant drivers of food insecurity (FAO, 2020). The second indicator – the number of people who are undernourished – highlights the scale of the challenge in some countries (e.g., Nigeria, Democratic

Republic of the Congo). Even if these nations have a relatively lower prevalence of undernourishment, several of them experienced localized conflict situations. The nexus of climate and economic stress requires innovative solutions that combine emergency response (e.g., safety nets) (explored below) as well as structural transformation to economies, which is why FAO stresses the importance of multisectoral approaches that integrate economic growth, economic diversification and inclusive economies as key to strengthening food security in the long term (FAO, 2020).

**FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION THAT IS UNDERNOURISHED, BY COUNTRY**



**Source:** World Food Programme (WFP) Hunger Map. The map draws on inconsistent dates of assessment; alternative data sources (e.g., FAO STAT, World Bank Data Bank, UNDP) have more missing data. In the WFP map, data is missing for six countries: Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Gabon, Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa.

TABLE 1. PREVALENCE AND NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO ARE UNDERNOURISHED, BY COUNTRY

| COUNTRY                  | POPULATION UNDERNOURISHED (PER CENT) | COUNTRY                          | POPULATION UNDERNOURISHED (MILLIONS) |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Somalia                  | 67.5                                 | Nigeria                          | 53.9                                 |
| Burkina Faso             | 58.6                                 | Democratic Republic of the Congo | 30.5                                 |
| Mali                     | 58.1                                 | Ethiopia                         | 14.9                                 |
| Guinea                   | 56.5                                 | Uganda                           | 14.9                                 |
| South Sudan              | 55.5                                 | Egypt                            | 12.2                                 |
| Central African Republic | 55.3                                 | Burkina Faso                     | 11.6                                 |
| Nigeria                  | 53.9                                 | Niger                            | 11.5                                 |
| Niger                    | 51.3                                 | Mali                             | 11.1                                 |
| Sao Tome and Principe    | 50.0                                 | Sudan                            | 10.3                                 |
| Sierra Leone             | 50.0                                 | Mozambique                       | 10.1                                 |
| Lesotho                  | 47.6                                 |                                  |                                      |

Source: World Food Programme (WFP) Hunger Map.

Projections show that the number of people experiencing poverty in sub-Saharan Africa is estimated to have increased by approximately 80 million owing to the impacts of the pandemic (Laborde, Martin and Vos, 2021). In addition to the fact that many African countries have had their export markets disrupted, another important consideration is that many African countries are net importers of food, and disruptions in international food systems due to COVID-19-related lockdown measures have large implications for accessibility and affordability of food within the region. With respect to consumption, lower purchasing

power due to reduced income levels and/or increases in the cost of food have contributed to higher hunger levels as reported across the continent. The initial months of the pandemic saw spikes in food prices, and these increases have been sustained in many countries. In Kenya, where the overall inflation rate increased from 4.36 per cent in July 2020 to 6.44 per cent in July 2021, the cost of food emerged as one of the main drivers. The country's food price inflation increased by 8.84 per cent in July 2021 when compared to the same period in 2020 (read more [here](#)). Food price monitoring data show that some of the main food

items affected are staples, which are particularly important for the diet of low-income households. In South Africa, estimates from five major urban areas show that the cost of staples, such as maize meal and sugar beans, increased by 12 per cent and 44 per cent respectively between September 2020 and July 2021 (read more [here](#)). While a variety of factors may be responsible for the increased cost of food in various parts of the region, the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on production and supply costs was also noted as one of the main contributory factors for the increase in food price inflation.

The implications of the impacts include changes in diet structure with negative effects on quantity and quality of foods consumed. In countries where data is available, the prevalence of hunger and those reporting lacking money to buy food has increased (read more [here](#)). Those disproportionately affected are low-income households living in rural areas and urban

## Nutrition

One of the main outcomes of food insecurity is malnutrition, which can take the form of either undernutrition (i.e., stunting, wasting and underweight) or overnutrition (i.e., overweight and obesity). Malnutrition continues to affect a significant proportion of Africa's population, particularly young children under 5 years of age. Stunting, which occurs when children are too short for their age, is the most common form of malnutrition across the region. Undernourishment and poor diet quality are some of the direct causes of stunting and other forms of undernutrition. It is estimated that in sub-Saharan Africa, 32.4 per cent of children under the age of 5 years were stunted in 2020 (UNICEF/WHO/World Bank, 2021).

While this figure represents an 11.4 percentage point decline from the 43.8 per cent reported in

informal settlements due to their pre-existing vulnerabilities. Available evidence also shows that gender inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and women have been disproportionately affected by the negative socioeconomic effects of the pandemic, including the loss of livelihoods and access to food. Some government responses to the pandemic have included cash transfers for the vulnerable (including children, the elderly and poor households), food aid and monetary support for small and medium-sized businesses. However, these have been short term and, in many cases, the monetary support has been small and has not necessarily reached all those in need. Support for those in the informal economy, including in the agricultural sector, has also been limited. The absence of formal social protection systems, combined with high levels of vulnerability and low levels of resilience, means that many households were not cushioned against the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19.

2000, it may not fully convey the gravity of the large number of children (57.3 million) estimated to be affected by this condition, and who are at risk of both short-term and long-term adverse effects. Additionally, it is estimated that 7 million children were underweight, and 2.5 million were wasted in 2020 (read more [here](#)). Other common forms of malnutrition that affect children – and women of reproductive age – include nutritional deficiencies (also called “hidden hunger”), such as vitamin A and iron deficiencies, which occur due to poor intake and absorption of vital micronutrients (vitamins and minerals). Malnutrition has negative effects on human development which are not limited to health. Educational outcomes are impacted as deficiencies can negatively impact cognitive and motor development. The long-term effects of malnutrition include

reduced productivity levels in adulthood, which affect employment and income. For low-income households, malnutrition contributes to the vicious cycle of poverty.

A worrying trend is the increase in overnutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases like hypertension and diabetes. These conditions are especially prevalent among the adult population, although prevalence among children has also been rising. The number of young children in Africa who are overweight is estimated to have increased from 8.2 million in 2000 to 10.6 million in 2020 (read more [here](#)). The prevalence of overweight and obesity is higher among adults. In South Africa, for example, it is estimated that 68 per cent of women and 31 per cent of

men are overweight or obese (NDoH and others, 2019). In Ghana, estimates suggest that 45.6 per cent of adults in the country are either overweight or obese (Ofori-Asenso and others, 2016). While, historically, overnutrition has been more prevalent in higher income populations, prevalence is increasing among low-income populations. This is mainly attributed to changes in diet structure, driven by increased availability of energy-dense foods and reduced accessibility to healthier options in part due to affordability constraints. Urban areas in particular have recorded increased demand for processed foods, which are not only highly palatable, but are also seen as more affordable, compared to healthier foods.



Ngebi Munzimba, from Popokabaka village, Bandundu Province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) shows maize from his field. Millions of Congolese required humanitarian assistance in October 2021, due to food insecurity in parts of the country. Credit: OCHA, Gemma Cortes.

## History of social protection for food security

Cash transfer programs are on the rise on the continent, and according to the World Bank's ASPIRE database, since 2000, Governments of at least 46 African countries have implemented cash transfer programmes (Ojong and Cochrane, 2021). It is worth mentioning that these programmes are both "old" and "new" on the continent. First, these programmes are old in the sense that they existed in colonial times and continued post independence. For instance, in Southern Africa, the concept of social assistance can be traced back to the 1920s, when it was framed as a non-contributory social pension. In South Africa, the non-contributory social pensions were instituted in 1928 in order "to lift 'poor whites' out of poverty and re-establish a clear racial hierarchy" (Seekings, 2007), and in 1944, the Government extended social old-age pensions to non-white populations, but offered much lower levels of benefits (Van der Berg, 1997). Between 1930 and 1950, similar social pension programmes were implemented in other African countries such as Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mauritius. Following in the footsteps of South Africa, other Southern African countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho and Eswatini, launched similar programmes between 1996 and 2005.

Apart from social pensions, a few countries on the continent introduced cash transfer programmes targeting the vulnerable population, in the 1980s and 1990s. Botswana launched the Destitute Persons Programme in 1980, which targeted persons with disabilities older than 18 years, who are unable to work, households with severely malnourished pregnant women, households with severely malnourished children and people who had been unemployed for more than two years (IDS, 2005). Mozambique implemented an urban

cash transfer programme in 1990 to support destitute households (Low and others, 1999).

Second, cash transfers may be considered "new" on the continent as a significant percentage of them were launched in the 2000s, with the support of donor agencies and the World Bank, following the success of Brazil's cash transfer programme. Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty project, which included cash transfers as its core element, was launched in 2008, inspired by Brazil's cash transfer experience (Debrah, 2013). At present, there are cash transfer programmes in several countries, and some Governments are expanding these programmes. In Senegal, the National Cash Transfer Programme expanded from 3 per cent of the total population in 2013 to 16 per cent of the total population in 2016, while in the United Republic of Tanzania, Productive Social Safety Net coverage increased from 0.4 per cent to 10 per cent during the same period (World Bank, 2018).

In addition to formal social safety net programmes, traditional safety net initiatives have existed and continue to flourish in contemporary Africa. People are often embedded in multiple social networks made up of kin, friends, neighbours, colleagues, etc., which enable them to have access to various resources to meet their everyday needs such as food, shelter, care labour, health-care financing, etc. (Ojong, 2020). Traditional safety nets tend to function based on the principles of trust, exchange and reciprocity (Ojong, 2019; Shipton, 2007). The presence of traditional safety nets means that populations without access to formal safety net programmes get some degree of protection against shocks and vulnerabilities (Awortwi, 2018).



A woman pounding cassava in Tsakala Bamba, Bandundu Province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to the World Food Programme (WFP), in October 2021, **the number of acutely food-insecure people stood at 26.2 million**, making access to food a daily struggle for a significant part of the Congolese population. Credit: OCHA, Gemma Cortes.

## Safety nets

In addition to formal social safety net programmes, traditional safety net initiatives have existed and continue to flourish in contemporary Africa. People are often embedded in multiple social networks made up of kin, friends, neighbours, colleagues, etc., which enable them to have access to various resources to meet their everyday needs such as food, shelter, care labour, health-care financing, etc. (Ojong, 2020). Traditional safety nets tend to function based on the principles of trust, exchange and reciprocity

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Substantial amounts of resources have been spent in Africa in the fight against famine. The investments by donors and Governments had been guided by the ad-hoc relief approach, which was costly and unpredictable, until the

introduction and expansion of social safety net programmes. With the ambition to break from the short-term-oriented relief approach, several Governments in Africa have collaborated with donors to develop social safety net programmes, particularly since the late 1990s.

Today, social safety nets support millions of vulnerable and poor households. Apart from the resource variable, the sustainability of safety nets is subject to political commitment (Lavers and Hickey, 2015). Most countries and donors forged partnerships to reconfigure the emergency-assistance approach towards relatively more predictable social safety nets. Social safety net programmes in Africa have two main purposes: supporting the poor, and protecting them from shocks (Monchuk, 2014). Social safety net programmes have adopted various modalities from social cash transfers to public works. Such examples include Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), the safety net programmes in Malawi and Kenya, and South Africa's Social Protection System, as noted above. More recently, there has been development towards broader, universal, social protection, of the promotive and transformative sort, embracing more sectors, such as public health and education. A case in point is South Africa's child support, foster care and old age grants (Holmes and Lwanga-Ntale, 2012).

Safety nets have the potential to tackle chronic poverty and to strengthen food security. Some of the safety net programmes in Africa (e.g., in Malawi, Ethiopia and Kenya), however, do not offer universal coverage; instead they are led by targeting theory (see Beegle, Coudouel and Monsalve, 2018). Targeting has implications in the effective implementation of safety nets, especially in situations where there is no national database on the poverty profile, as those deserving poor may be

left out (Dejene and Cochrane, 2021). Evidence from those case studies (Merttens and others, 2017; Dejene and Cochrane, 2021; Duchoslav and Kenamu, 2018) and other programmes elsewhere in Africa suggest the same.

There, however, is little evidence in the capacity of safety nets to transform livelihoods towards the Sustainable Development Goals agenda. This is due to limitations in resources provision (Devereux and Ulrichs, 2015; Duchoslav and Kenamu, 2018; Dejene and Cochrane, 2021), institutional capacity and implementation challenges (Dejene and Cochrane, 2021; 2020; 2019). A renewed commitment to harness the potential of safety nets towards the Sustainable Development Goals agenda requires addressing resource, institutional and implementation issues. In designing safety nets, the unique situation of each country, region or area must be taken into account. Issues to consider include, conditional or unconditional transfer (e.g., public works or direct support), modality of transfer (cash or in kind), payment system (cash or paper-based/payroll or digital transfer) and coverage (targeted versus universal). One limitation of safety net programmes in Africa is that programme designers pursue a "best practice" approach that replicates models in new places. While scalability and diffusion are laudable, what worked well in one place may not fit elsewhere. For example, a mobile-based transfer that is effective in areas with good network connectivity will not work in areas with limited or no infrastructure (Dejene and Cochrane, 2020). Programmes, therefore, need to be inspired by a "best fit" approach rather than by "best practice".

In so doing, Governments in Africa need to consider the right to food as a human right and tailor their policies in a way they would curb recurrent and serious food insecurity events. This is vital

to curb the devastating impact of famine on their economies and on society at large. Investing a very small portion of their GDP could help to curb recurring famine. Donors need to support such endeavors especially at the early stages of policy implementation. Governments in Africa need to progressively align social safety nets with productive policies, including supporting clients in the area of productive assets such as agricultural

subsidies and livestock production. The cost incurred in installing pertinent social safety net programmes aligned with food production towards a resilient approach is by far less than the impact of the famine disaster that could happen in the absence of such programmes. Hence, Governments in Africa need to work towards universal social protection coverage for their citizens.

## Recommendations

### ENSURING THE RIGHT TO FOOD

- **Invest in data and data systems:** Investing in early warning systems and the data needed to support decision-making (e.g., Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) has supported the averting of famine. For food security, insufficient data is available to support decision-making to support appropriate and tailored programmes and services. This is not necessarily the absence of all forms of data; in some cases, there are specific data needs, such as in diet quality and seasonality of nutrition. Such data are important for the design of strategies to improve consumption of healthier diets and reduce malnutrition. Where actors are collecting data, greater effort needs to be put into coordination, data systems and ensuring data usability. In some cases, there is a lot of data, but it is siloed within organizations, held as proprietary, or in non-standardized form that reduces usability.
- **Localize the design of policies, programmes, and services (best fit, not best practice):** Safety nets, cash transfers and nutrition programmes have the potential to ensure the right to food. However, inappropriate programme design, even if “best practice” from elsewhere, can result in implementation challenges and cause unintended negative consequences. Design needs to be contextualized as the “best fit” for the given context, which may require multiple designs within a country. An example of an unintended negative impact is informal loan arrangements and the resulting indebtedness due to lengthy delays in transfers. The successes of programmes like Bolsa Família in Brazil were due to localization to ensure that implementation was realistic and responded to specific local challenges. Too many donor-funded and donor-driven social protection programmes are modeled after “best practice”, and too little emphasis is placed on the localization of design.
- **Expand social protection to reach everyone:** Almost all Governments in Africa have implemented at least one form of cash transfer programme as part of their social protection programmes. These efforts need to be scaled. Scaling low-cost programmes are increasingly a reality – for example, cell phone coverage and mobile money platforms. While these opportunities should be utilized, their implementation needs to start with those furthest behind, as advocated in the 2030 Agenda objective. Starting with those most behind means focusing not only on individuals, but on groups of people who have been excluded and marginalized and/or who experience specific challenges. In many ways, this includes scaling up activities that we know how to implement well, such as infant-feeding practices and nutrition as well as micronutrient

supplementation, but which remain out of reach for too many. This scaling requires significant investment over the long-term, with impacts expected on the generational scale.

## ENABLING SYSTEMS CHANGE FOR TRANSFORMATION

- **Rethink social protection to include transforming our approach to nutrition and food safety:** Cash and/or food transfers are important, however, these may not address the “silent hunger” of nutrition deficiencies nor do they address systemic issues related to the quality of food systems. This will include introducing bottom-up and top-down mechanisms to alter the food system, enabling easier access to healthy and fresh foods while making it more challenging to access unhealthy foods. While greater attention has been paid to micro-nutrient deficiencies and nutrition-related disease, relatively little attention has been granted to food safety, such as challenges related to aflatoxin or unregulated pesticide and herbicide use. This challenge is not about regulations and policies per se; although these are important, implementation and capacity are systemic issues that present barriers to system transformation.
- **Building resilience:** To date, social protection has tended to focus on meeting basic requirements often for small targeted groups; COVID-19 has shown us that minor disruptions (more of which can be expected with climate change and the pandemic) can push tens of millions into food insecurity. Decades of progress can be swiftly lost. Building resilience requires moving beyond meeting minimums. Agricultural support systems need to be demand driven to meet user needs, while the broader objectives need

to be nutrition oriented, not export oriented. Climate change demands long-term planning that is attentive to expected impact and suitable adaptation plans that look beyond 2100. Investments are necessary (e.g., tenure systems, small- and medium-scale irrigation, markets, roads, energy); these need to be embedded within systems that are oriented towards long-term resilience-building that are cross-cutting and multisectoral (and this is not an issue for Ministries of Agriculture alone, but rather it requires health, education and finance, among others).

- **Transforming systems:** Many of the challenges faced by Governments in Africa are not of their own choice. International trade rules and the imposition of policy often serve interests elsewhere, but Governments have an extremely challenging task contesting these regimes, as they also require their acknowledgment, participation and funding. Contesting the path of dependency that put many countries in a position of vulnerability requires careful renegotiation and delinking. The African Continent Free Trade Area ([AfCFTA](#)) has the potential to support such a shift, although that is not guaranteed to be the case. Some countries have successfully required value addition before export, thereby ensuring that a greater share of the proceeds of materials stays within the country, while, at the same time, enabling the creation of better employment opportunities. Decades of system transformation efforts have been made by a range of great leaders, and no simple solution exists to navigate the complex challenges presented. Securing the future that African people seek necessitates the continuation of that struggle.



Women carrying baskets full of manioc to sell in the local market in Popokabaka, Bandundu province, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). According to the World Food Programme (WFP), millions of people in parts of DRC faced food insecurity in 2021 following a recent drought. Credit: OCHA, Gemma Cortes.

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