

Food Systems for Peace

**Towards food systems that contribute to peace
without reinforcing conflict**

October 2026

Gerrit-Jan van Uffelen

Pascal Debons

Ruth van de Velde

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the consultations and thematic workshop for their insights, reflections and constructive contributions. We hope this paper provides a useful basis for further deliberation, dialogue and joint action among NFP partners and other actors committed to strengthening resilient and inclusive food systems in FCAS.

The paper draws on consultations with NFP partners and on the experience and perspectives shared during the thematic workshop. The following provides an overview of the organisations that contributed to this process.

- Government/donors: Ministry of Foreign Affairs departments of International Green Growth (IGG) and Department for Stabilisation and Humanitarian Aid (DSH), and; Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO).
- Knowledge organisations: the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS); Royal Tropical Institute (KIT); Clingendael; Wageningen University & Research (WUR), and; GlocalShift.
- Private sector actors: Netherlands-African Business Council (NABC); East West Seed; HSH-Yemen; Signature Agriculture.
- NGOs and civil society: the Hunger Project; CORDAID; ZOA; the Dutch relief Alliance (DRA), and; IDH – the Sustainable Trade Initiative.
- International organisations: The Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty; G7+, and; the UN Food Systems Co-ordination Hub.

Special thanks are due to Laura Birkmann from the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, as well as, CORDAID and the Hunger Project for their critical review of the draft paper and their valuable and constructive feedback.



We further acknowledge the support of the Netherlands–CGIAR Research Programme (file number INT.1723.24.012) under the Senior Expert Programme II, financed by the Dutch Research Council (NWO), which contributed to the consultations and the development of the final documents.

Contents

Executive summary.....	iii
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Why food systems matter for peace.....	1
1.2 Consultations: key findings and insights.....	1
1.3 This paper.....	2
2. What can food systems contribute to peace – and under what conditions?.....	3
2.1 How food systems interact with conflict and peace.....	3
2.2 Food systems can create opportunities for cooperation and social cohesion.....	4
2.3 The contribution of food systems to peace depends on fair and inclusive governance.....	5
2.4 Food systems can contribute to peace, but cannot resolve conflict on their own.....	5
In summary.....	6
3. Designing and implementing Food Systems for Peace.....	7
3.1 Understand conflict dynamics and adapt as contexts change.....	7
3.2 Design food-system interventions to build trust and social cohesion.....	8
3.3 Work with local institutions and ensure inclusive local ownership.....	9
3.4 Address power, governance and the limits of food-system programming.....	11
In summary.....	11
4. What needs to change to make Food Systems for Peace possible?.....	13
4.1 Develop a shared understanding of Food Systems for Peace.....	13
4.2 Strengthen policies, institutions and incentives behind a food-systems approach.....	14
4.3 Align funding and financing to support longer-term and adaptive engagement.....	15
4.4 Improve coherence between humanitarian, development and peace efforts.....	15
4.5 Build partnerships that bring together the right capabilities.....	16
In summary.....	17
5. Key findings and recommendations.....	18

Executive summary

Food Systems for Peace is not about assuming that better food security automatically produces peace and stability. It is about deliberately understanding and strengthening the ways in which food systems can contribute to social cohesion, trust and peace, while ensuring that interventions do not inadvertently reinforce conflict. This requires moving beyond conventional food-security programming to consider how food-system interventions affect relationships between people and groups, power relations, governance and conflict dynamics.

To scope opportunities for a potential Stability Partnership, NFP with support of WUR facilitated consultations with partners and a thematic workshop to explore the role and potential of transforming food systems in fragile and conflict-affected settings so that they can contribute more intentionally to peace and stability while reducing the risk of reinforcing conflict.

The discussions explored three questions that together define what is needed to build Food Systems for Peace: what food systems can contribute to peace and under what conditions; how this potential can be translated into conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive programming; and what enabling conditions are needed to make this way of working possible.

The discussions point to three key findings. First, food systems have an important but bounded potential to contribute to peace, including through existing local practices and institutions that support cooperation and peaceful coexistence. Second, this potential needs to be intentionally operationalised through locally owned, adaptive and conflict-sensitive programming that strengthens trust, social cohesion and resilience alongside food security and livelihoods. Third, this way of working requires a wider enabling environment, including longer-term and flexible funding, greater coherence across humanitarian, development and peace efforts, and knowledge partnerships that connect food-system expertise with conflict, peacebuilding and data and risk-analysis expertise.

Together these findings point to an emerging Food Systems for Peace agenda that requires further learning, practical experimentation and policy engagement. NFP and its Stability Partnership can play a useful convening and connecting role, linking Dutch and international experience with locally led efforts, supporting learning and evidence generation through both qualitative and quantitative approaches to risk and conflict analysis, and helping translate emerging practice into policy and action.



1. Introduction

1.1 Why food systems matter for peace

Food systems are deeply connected to conflict, stability and peace. They can reinforce conflict and grievances, for example through competition over resources, unequal access to food and markets, or exclusion from economic opportunities. These dynamics are also shaped by wider national, regional and global forces, including trade restrictions, shocks in fertiliser and grain markets, and the deliberate use or restriction of food as a tool of conflict and political influence. But food systems can also provide important foundations and entry points for peace, by sustaining livelihoods and food security, creating opportunities for cooperation and dialogue, and strengthening social cohesion.

Whether food systems contribute to peace or conflict depends on the context, including how resources and opportunities are distributed, who participates, how food systems are governed, and how different actors and institutions interact.

Against this background, consultations with NFP partners identified Food Systems for Peace as a potentially useful way of thinking about and working with these interconnections. Rather than treating food security, food systems resilience and peace as separate agendas, it seeks to understand how food systems can be intentionally shaped to reduce conflict risks, strengthen social cohesion and contribute to longer-term peace and stability, while recognising the limits of what food-system interventions can achieve.

A Food Systems for Peace approach:

- Dutch priorities on stability and conflict prevention with sustainable food systems and inclusive green growth, providing a potential bridge between the Inclusive Green Growth (IGG) department and the Directie Stabiliteit en Humanitaire Hulp (DSH; 'Stability and Humanitarian Aid Department') and supporting more coherent, systems-based programming in fragile and conflict-affected settings.
- Helps prevent harm by ensuring that food-system interventions do not reinforce inequalities, grievances or conflict and instead strengthen cooperation and social cohesion where possible.
- Provides a practical entry point for the HDP-nexus, connecting humanitarian, development and peace actors around a concrete system - food - that affects people's lives and livelihoods.
- Responds to the need to move beyond HDP-nexus rhetoric by focusing on practical ways of working together, grounded in local realities and evidence.
- Builds on the Netherlands' long-term engagement and partnerships in fragile food systems, particularly in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel/West Africa, where protracted conflict, fragility and increasing climate pressures are placing additional strain on food systems, livelihoods and food security.

1.2 Consultations: key findings and insights

The consultations with NFP partners highlighted three broad findings that shaped the subsequent thematic workshop and this paper.

The HDP-nexus provides an important entry point for Food Systems for Peace but has not yet translated into sufficiently joined-up practice. HDP-nexus programming offers opportunities to bring humanitarian, development and peace perspectives together around food systems. However, sectoral silos, funding structures and institutional barriers continue to limit shared analysis and joint programming, create misaligned incentives and accountability systems, and contribute to the dominance of humanitarian responses in protracted food crises.

There is both a need and an opportunity to further develop the concept of Food Systems for Peace and put it to practice. NFP's partners highlighted the importance of flexible, evidence-informed and adaptive approaches that respond to changing conditions in protracted crises. This includes understanding how food systems interact with conflict and peace, designing interventions that intentionally strengthen resilience, trust and social cohesion, and creating greater coherence between humanitarian, development and peace efforts.

The Netherlands has an opportunity to build on its long-term engagement and partnerships to advance Food Systems for Peace. Dutch engagement in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel/West Africa provides a basis for connecting food-system expertise, local partnerships and peacebuilding experience, and for contributing to more coherent Dutch - and potentially European - engagement in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

These findings provided the starting point for the thematic workshop and the three learning questions explored in this paper.

1.3 This paper

This paper brings together the findings of consultations with NFP partners and a subsequent thematic workshop to explore the potential of Food Systems for Peace and what it could mean in practice.

The paper starts from the recognition that food systems are inherently social, economic and political systems. They can reinforce existing inequalities and grievances or, under the right conditions, strengthen cooperation, social cohesion and peace. The paper does not assume a simple or linear relationship between food security and peace. Instead, it asks how food systems and food system interventions can be intentionally designed, implemented and governed to contribute to resilience and peace in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

The paper is structured around three learning questions:

- Potential – What can food systems contribute to peace, and under what conditions?
- Practice – How can food-system interventions address immediate needs while strengthening resilience, reducing conflict risks and supporting longer-term peace?
- Enabling conditions – What institutional, financing and policy conditions are needed to enable more joined-up, context-driven action, and what role can the Netherlands play?

The paper concludes with recommendations and proposed ways forward for further dialogue and action, including a possible role for NFP in facilitating learning, connections and action among its partners.

2. What can food systems contribute to peace – and under what conditions?

This section addresses the first question: What contribution can food systems make to peace and social cohesion, and where are their limits?

The consultations and workshop highlighted four interrelated dimensions that shape this contribution:

- How food systems and conflict shape one another – understanding the two-way relationship between food systems, conflict and peace.
- The peacebuilding capacities already embedded in local food systems – recognising existing forms of cooperation, exchange and local institutions that can support trust and social cohesion.
- The importance of fair and inclusive governance – recognising that the contribution of food systems to peace depends on how resources, opportunities and benefits are governed and distributed.
- The limits of food systems for peace – recognising that food systems can contribute to resilience, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence, but cannot address the wider political, security and governance dynamics that drive violent conflict.

Together, these four dimensions provide a framework for understanding the potential and limits of Food Systems for Peace, and for identifying how this potential can be translated into practice.

2.1 How food systems interact with conflict and peace

Food systems are both shaped by conflict and peace and can shape the dynamics of conflict and peace. Understanding these interactions is essential to identifying where food-system interventions can strengthen peace and where they may inadvertently reinforce conflict dynamics.

Conflict disrupts food systems - and food insecurity can reinforce conflict

Conflict and protracted crises disrupt food production, markets, livelihoods and access to natural resources, often worsening food insecurity. At the same time, food insecurity, competing claims over resources, and unequal access to food, land, water and markets can exacerbate tensions and grievances. The relationship is therefore two-way and highly context-specific, with food systems sometimes being both affected by and contributing to conflict.

Climate change can amplify food-system and conflict dynamics

Climate change is an important additional pressure on food systems in fragile and conflict-affected settings. Droughts, floods, changing rainfall patterns and other climate-related shocks can disrupt food production, livelihoods and markets, increase competition over land and water, and reduce the capacity of households and institutions to cope with crises. These pressures do not automatically lead to conflict, but can amplify existing tensions and vulnerabilities, particularly where governance is weak, resources are contested or communities have limited alternatives.

Climate change can therefore reinforce feedback loops between food insecurity, livelihoods and conflict. At the same time, food-system responses to climate risks can themselves affect relations between groups, for example where access to land, water, markets or adaptation resources is unequal. Understanding these interactions is therefore important for both conflict sensitivity and efforts to build food system resilience and peace.

Peace and food security reinforce one another

Reliable access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food contributes to stability and wellbeing, while peace and stability create conditions in which food systems can function and develop. Food security is an important outcome of inclusive food systems, which also support livelihoods, economic opportunities and cooperation between people and communities. Yet food security must also be protected in situations of conflict, which can erode and sometimes deliberately target food systems. Humanitarian assistance therefore remains essential. Recognising these connections means addressing immediate food needs while, where possible, strengthening the resilience, cooperation and social cohesion of food systems in ways that can contribute to peace and stability.

Food security should therefore not be viewed simply as an outcome of peace, but as an important outcome of food systems and part of the foundation on which peace and stability can be built.

Local pathways between food systems, conflict and peace remain poorly understood

Participants stressed that more evidence is needed on how food systems interact with conflict and peace, particularly at the local level. Understanding who controls resources, how markets function, where tensions arise and which food-system relationships help manage them is essential for identifying opportunities for peacebuilding. Closing this evidence gap requires combining quantitative indicators – such as resource stress, market disruption and displacement – with locally grounded qualitative analysis and validation. Such an approach can help identify patterns and emerging risks while ensuring that these are understood in light of local knowledge, perceptions and conflict dynamics.

2.2 Food systems can create opportunities for cooperation and social cohesion

Food systems are not only affected by conflict; they also contain existing capacities for cooperation, dialogue and peaceful management of competing interests. These capacities provide important entry points for strengthening social cohesion and resilience.

Everyday food-system interactions can build trust and cooperation

Local food systems often rely on cooperation and negotiated arrangements to function. Communities share seeds and labour, trade across social and ethnic boundaries, and negotiate access to land, water and grazing areas. Customary institutions and other local mechanisms can help mediate competing claims and resolve disputes. These everyday interactions can create trust and positive interdependence that support peaceful coexistence.

Food provides a practical entry point for dialogue and cooperation

Food is an everyday and shared concern in people's lives and livelihoods, creating opportunities to bring different groups together around common interests. Food systems can therefore provide practical entry points for dialogue, cooperation and relationship-building, contributing to peace and stability.

Food systems can help bridge humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts

Food security, as an important outcome of food systems, provides a practical platform for greater coherence across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus. Humanitarian assistance can address immediate needs while creating opportunities to build relationships, strengthen local capacities and connect communities to longer-term food-system and resilience initiatives.

2.3 The contribution of food systems to peace depends on fair and inclusive governance

Food systems do not automatically contribute to peace. Their peacebuilding potential depends on how resources, opportunities and decision-making are governed, and whether different groups perceive these arrangements as fair and legitimate.

Fair governance can reduce tensions around resources and markets

Food systems can support peace by creating mechanisms for negotiating access to land, water and other natural resources and by strengthening trade and economic relationships between communities. Where rules are considered legitimate and applied fairly, these mechanisms can help manage competing interests and reduce grievances.

Weak governance can turn food systems into sources of conflict

Weak institutions, corruption, elite capture and poor enforcement can reinforce exclusion and deepen grievances. In some contexts, armed groups and other actors deliberately disrupt or control food production, markets and natural resources to weaken livelihoods and increase insecurity. Such tactics of war can include restricting access to food and markets through sieges or blockades, controlling key trading routes and food supplies, or taking control of agricultural land, irrigation systems and water infrastructure. The same food-system dynamics that can support cooperation can therefore also contribute to conflict.

Inclusive approaches are essential

Conflict affects different groups differently. Women, youth and marginalised groups may face distinct barriers to land, food, markets, finance and livelihoods, while also experiencing insecurity in different ways.

Inclusive approaches should not only address barriers and vulnerabilities but also recognise and strengthen existing agency. Women, in particular, often play central roles in food production, household food security and community-level cooperation and mediation. Recognising these existing roles and contributions, alongside addressing barriers to participation and decision-making, is essential to building more inclusive and cohesive food systems.

2.4 Food systems can contribute to peace, but cannot resolve conflict on their own

Participants emphasised the need for realistic expectations about the contribution food systems can make to peace. Food systems can provide important foundations and entry points for peace, but they cannot address the wider political, economic and security dynamics that drive many conflicts.

Food systems are one part of broader peacebuilding efforts

In many protracted crises, conflict is driven by political, security and economic dynamics that food-system interventions cannot resolve. Food systems should therefore be seen as one component of broader peacebuilding and resilience efforts, rather than as a substitute for political or security interventions.

Humanitarian action remains essential – but is insufficient on its own

Peacebuilding initiatives cannot succeed if people's immediate food needs remain unmet. Humanitarian assistance therefore remains indispensable in crises. At the same time, short-term humanitarian responses alone cannot strengthen the longer-term capacities and resilience of local food systems. Where circumstances allow, humanitarian assistance should therefore be connected to longer-term efforts that

strengthen local food systems, resilience and peaceful cooperation, creating greater continuity between short-term humanitarian response and longer-term development and peacebuilding efforts.

Build on what already contributes to peaceful coexistence

Many local food systems already contain practices and institutions that support cooperation, including seed sharing, reciprocal labour, negotiated resource access and customary mechanisms for resolving disputes. Rather than introducing entirely new mechanisms, programming should first understand these existing capacities and seek to reinforce what is already working.

Workshop insight – Food Systems for Peace means working with the peace potential of food systems

The workshop highlighted that Food Systems for Peace should not be understood as an expectation that food-system interventions can “build peace” on their own. Rather, it is about recognising and deliberately strengthening the ways in which food systems can contribute to the foundations of peace: sustaining livelihoods and food security, creating opportunities for cooperation and dialogue, strengthening social cohesion, and providing mechanisms for managing competing interests and resources.

At the same time, food systems can contribute to both peace and conflict. Whether they support peaceful coexistence depends on the context, how food systems are governed, who benefits and who is excluded, and how interventions interact with existing conflict dynamics. Food Systems for Peace therefore requires understanding these relationships and dynamics, identifying where food systems and food-system programming can support peace, and deliberately strengthening these capacities while avoiding interventions that reinforce exclusion, grievances or conflict.

In summary

This section shows that food systems have an important but bounded potential to contribute to peace. They can provide foundations, relationships and entry points for cooperation and social cohesion, but their contribution depends on context, governance and the way interventions are designed. Food Systems for Peace is therefore as much about how we understand and work with food systems as it is about what we seek to achieve through them.

This leads to the next question: how can this potential be translated into practice? This will be addressed in section 3.

3. Designing and implementing Food Systems for Peace

This section addresses the second question: How can Food Systems for Peace interventions be designed and implemented to be conflict-sensitive and peace-responsive? The consultations and workshop explored how interventions can address immediate food and livelihood needs while also strengthening resilience, reducing conflict risks and contributing to longer-term stability and peace.

The discussions highlighted that Food Systems for Peace requires more than adding a peace objective to conventional food-system programming. It requires a different way of designing and implementing interventions - one that understands how conflict shapes food systems and how interventions may in turn affect conflict dynamics; builds on local capacities and institutions; creates space for inclusive participation, trust and collective action; and pays attention to power and governance.

Four interrelated principles emerged as particularly important for putting Food Systems for Peace into practice:

- Understand conflict dynamics and adapt as contexts change – ground interventions in an understanding of how conflict shapes the food system and how interventions may affect conflict dynamics and adapt as contexts change.
- Use food-system activities to build trust and social cohesion – identify opportunities for cooperation, dialogue and collective action through food-system activities, and make their contribution to trust, social cohesion and peace an explicit programme objective.
- Build on local institutions and ensure inclusive ownership – work with existing local capacities and institutions while ensuring that women, youth, marginalised groups and other local actors have meaningful influence over programme design and implementation.
- Address power, governance and the limits of food-system programming – pay attention to how power, resource access and governance shape outcomes, while recognising that food-system interventions cannot substitute for the wider security, rule of law and political processes needed to address violent conflict.

Together, these principles provide a practical framework for operationalising Food Systems for Peace in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

3.1 Understand conflict dynamics and adapt as contexts change

Food-system interventions in fragile and conflict-affected settings need to understand how conflict shapes food systems and how food-system interventions may affect conflict dynamics. This requires locally grounded analysis, attention to who gains and who may lose, and the ability to adapt as contexts change.

Conflict analysis needs to be locally grounded

Conflict analysis should not rely solely on external assessments. Local actors and communities should be involved in analysing conflict dynamics, power relations and social institutions. This can strengthen the quality of analysis while also building local ownership of the intervention.

Identify who gains and who may lose, and manage the trade-offs

Food-system changes inevitably create winners and losers. Changes in access to resources, markets, technologies or economic opportunities may benefit some groups while disadvantaging others. In FCAS, understanding who may gain or lose, how they are affected, and what influence they have is critical to

anticipating tensions and avoiding unintended harm. Programmes should identify and, where possible, manage these trade-offs rather than assuming that positive outcomes for some will benefit everyone.

Adapt as the context changes

In humanitarian settings, there is often little time for extensive analysis before programmes need to start. Conflict analysis should therefore be treated as an ongoing process rather than a one-off exercise.

Programmes need to adapt as understanding of the context improves and conflict dynamics change.

Early warning and risk-monitoring approaches can help make this possible by systematically tracking changes in relevant indicators and combining these with the experiences, perspectives and knowledge of people and organisations directly affected by changing conflict dynamics. Such approaches can offer useful models for anticipating emerging risks and informing timely adaptation, rather than relying on one-off conflict assessments.

Avoid reinforcing existing power imbalances

Poor understanding of local power relations can result in elite or government capture of programmes, reinforce existing inequalities and create new tensions. Conflict sensitivity therefore requires careful attention to who controls resources, who benefits and who may be excluded. Existing conflict-sensitivity tools can help programmes assess these power relations and identify risks of reinforcing inequalities or creating new tensions.

3.2 Design food-system interventions to build trust and social cohesion

Workshop participants noted that food-security programming often prioritises agricultural production, value chains and nutrition outcomes, while paying less attention to how interventions can intentionally build trust, cooperation and social cohesion among communities. Food-system interventions should therefore consider not only what they deliver for food security, nutrition and livelihoods, but also how they affect relationships between people and groups. Food systems provide everyday opportunities for interaction and cooperation that programming can either strengthen or undermine.

Build on opportunities for cooperation

Programmes should identify practical opportunities for food-system actors to cooperate around shared interests – for example, production, trade, natural-resource management or access to markets. Cooperation can be an intentional pathway through which food systems contribute to peace, by building trust, strengthening relationships and creating positive interdependence between groups. Building on existing forms of cooperation can therefore strengthen both food-system resilience and social cohesion.

Create spaces for dialogue that lead to collective action

Food-system programmes can create opportunities for actors who may otherwise have limited interaction to come together, understand different perspectives and identify shared interests. Dialogue is most valuable when it leads to practical cooperation and tangible results – for example, jointly managing resources, resolving disputes or improving access to markets. This can help build trust and strengthen relationships over time. Dialogue alone, however, cannot resolve violent conflict or sustain peace; it needs to be connected to meaningful opportunities for collective action.

Make peace and social cohesion explicit objectives of food-system programming

Food-system programmes should consider from the outset how their activities can contribute to peace and social cohesion, alongside food security, nutrition and livelihood objectives. This means being intentional

about designing activities that strengthen trust, cooperation and peaceful relationships, rather than assuming these will emerge as indirect benefits. It also requires monitoring not only what programmes deliver, but how they affect relationships between people and groups, including whether they strengthen or undermine trust and cooperation.

Workshop case study – Integrate peacebuilding into food-system programming: lessons from ZOA

ZOA's experience in Ethiopia, DRC and South Sudan shows how food-system and livelihood activities can provide practical entry points for peacebuilding. Rather than treating peacebuilding as a separate activity, ZOA combined agricultural and livelihood support with local peace committees, community structures and participatory planning. In Ethiopia, for example, joint livelihood activities and markets brought refugee and host communities together, while peace committees helped address conflicts around land, farming and livestock.

In DRC, Participatory Integrated Planning (PIP) brought communities and local authorities together to plan activities around agriculture, value chains, land and water management. The experience suggests that working together on practical challenges can change relationships and behaviour, with reported improvements in cooperation and reductions in local conflicts.

The case illustrates how Food Systems for Peace can be operationalised by integrating peacebuilding into food-system and livelihood programming. Participatory planning can bring different actors and objectives together, while practical food-system activities create opportunities for collaboration and behavioural change that can strengthen social cohesion and reduce conflict.

3.3 Work with local institutions and ensure inclusive local ownership

Local institutions and actors are central to the functioning of food systems and often have important capacities for managing resources, resolving disputes and sustaining cooperation. Food Systems for Peace programming should therefore work through and strengthen local capacities rather than create parallel structures.

Build on institutions that already manage conflict and resources

Traditional institutions and other locally accepted mechanisms can play an important role in managing access to land, water and other resources and in mediating disputes. Understanding how these institutions function—and how they interact with formal government structures—is essential.

Recognise that local institutions are not always inclusive or benign

The role and legitimacy of traditional institutions vary across contexts and may have declined in some settings, particularly among younger generations. Some customary practices may also reinforce exclusion or contribute to conflict. They therefore need to be assessed carefully rather than automatically treated as positive or representative.

Put local actors at the centre

Women, youth, marginalised groups and other food-system actors should have meaningful opportunities to shape programme design and implementation. Local ownership should go beyond consultation: local actors should have the space, voice and capacity to influence decisions and shape solutions.

This means treating communities as agents of change, building on their existing capacities and supporting them to lead and sustain solutions rather than creating dependency on external support.

Workshop case study – use shared food-system resources as a pathway to peace: lessons from Suudu Baaba, Mali

The Suudu Baaba experience by CORDAID and its partners in Mali illustrates the potential of treating food systems not only as production systems, but also as systems of shared resources, relationships and local governance. The programme combined investments in shared food-system assets – such as water points, irrigation schemes and market-garden areas – with efforts to strengthen local resource governance and conflict-management mechanisms.

A key lesson is that shared interests can provide a practical pathway through which food systems contribute to peace. Rather than focusing on dialogue or peacebuilding activities alone, the approach created opportunities for communities to cooperate around resources that mattered to their livelihoods. Inclusive local committees were established and strengthened to manage water and natural resources and to prevent and resolve conflicts. Dialogue helped build trust, but the experience showed that practical collaboration around shared interests is particularly important. This principle is not limited to the local level: shared interests around food, water, markets and natural resources can also create opportunities for cooperation and dialogue between wider groups and institutions, including across administrative or national boundaries.

The approach also demonstrates the importance of starting from local realities and adapting over time. Participatory diagnosis, community-based development agents and regular field studies enabled the programme to understand local priorities and adjust implementation. The reported changes in trust, satisfaction with local dispute resolution and the use of local committees to manage disputes provide encouraging evidence of the potential of this approach.

The case illustrates how to work with the peace potential already embedded in food systems. Food Systems for Peace can be built by identifying food-system resources and interests that different groups share, and strengthening the local institutions and governance arrangements through which these are managed. In this way, investments that meet immediate food-system needs can also create opportunities for cooperation, trust and reduced conflict.

3.4 Address power, governance and the limits of food-system programming

Food Systems for Peace cannot operate independently of the wider political and security environment. Its effectiveness depends on how power is exercised, how resources and opportunities are governed, and whether rules are applied fairly.

Fair governance is essential for collective action

Collective action and cooperation can only be sustained when rules governing access to resources, markets and trade are perceived as fair and are applied consistently. Where elites can capture benefits or powerful actors are not subject to the same rules, interventions can reinforce grievances and undermine trust.

Recognise what food systems programming cannot solve

Some drivers of conflict – such as insecurity, armed groups, criminal activity and the proliferation or misuse of small arms – cannot be addressed through food-system programming alone. A basic level of security and rule of law is needed for food systems to function and for peacebuilding efforts to take hold. Food-system interventions should therefore be connected to, but not expected to substitute for, wider peace and governance efforts.

Embed peace in food systems transformation

Peace should not be treated as an additional outcome at the end of a food systems programme. It needs to be considered in national food systems pathways, programme objectives and implementation approaches from the outset. In protracted crises, addressing conflict dynamics is fundamental to building resilient food systems, just as resilient food systems can contribute to reducing conflict risks.

In summary

The central message of this chapter is that Food Systems for Peace needs both a different lens and a different way of working. Interventions need to understand how food systems interact with conflict, deliberately strengthen their peace-supporting effects, build on existing local capacities and relationships, and adapt as contexts change. Peace and social cohesion should be treated as intentional objectives alongside food security and resilience, rather than assumed to emerge as indirect benefits.

This way of working, however, cannot depend on individual programmes or organisations alone. It requires an enabling environment in which policies, institutions, funding mechanisms, incentives and partnerships support locally grounded, adaptive and joined-up approaches.

Workshop insight – Food Systems for Peace requires changing how we programme

The workshop highlighted that Food Systems for Peace is not simply a new objective to add to existing food security or food systems programmes. It requires a different way of designing and implementing interventions – one that starts with an understanding of conflict dynamics at different levels, builds on local capacities, creates space for inclusive participation and collective action, and pays explicit attention to power and governance.

At the same time, participants stressed the importance of being realistic about what food-system programming can achieve. Food systems can create opportunities for cooperation, trust and resilience, but they cannot substitute for security, rule of law or broader political processes needed to resolve violent conflict.

The implication is that Food Systems for Peace requires both a different lens and a different way of working: understanding how interventions interact with conflict, deliberately strengthening their peace-supporting effects, and adapting as contexts change. This also requires funding and evaluation approaches that allow programmes to adapt as contexts and understanding evolve, rather than being tied to fixed plans and indicators.

This raises the next question: what needs to change in the wider system to make Food Systems for Peace possible? If this way of working requires longer-term engagement, locally anchored partnerships, flexible

and adaptive programming, and greater coherence across humanitarian, development and peace actors, then the institutional and financing environment also needs to support these ways of working.

Chapter 4 therefore examines the enabling conditions needed (institutional, financial and policy changes) to enable more joined-up and context-driven food-system responses.

4. What needs to change to make Food Systems for Peace possible?

The previous section showed that Food Systems for Peace requires a different way of working: one that is conflict-sensitive, locally grounded, adaptive and able to connect immediate needs with longer-term resilience and peace.

The consultations and workshop highlighted that this cannot be achieved through programme design alone. The wider system in which programmes operate also needs to support this way of working. Five interrelated areas of change emerged as particularly important:

- Develop a shared understanding and approach – establish a common understanding of what Food Systems for Peace means in practice, including its objectives, principles and how its contribution to peace can be assessed, recognising that this encompasses not only violent conflict but also tensions, instability and the conditions that enable sustainable cooperation and peaceful coexistence.
- Strengthen policies, institutions and incentives – ensure that policies, institutional mandates and accountability systems support more integrated, locally grounded and context-responsive approaches.
- Adapt funding and financing – provide longer-term, flexible and adaptive funding that reflects the realities of protracted crises and creates incentives for integrated food-system and peace-responsive programming.
- Improve coherence and local implementation – strengthen coherence across humanitarian, development and peace efforts, while ensuring that implementation is grounded in local realities, priorities and capacities.
- Build the right partnerships – bring together complementary expertise and perspectives, including food systems, conflict, peacebuilding, governance, research and the private sector, while putting local actors at the centre.

Together, these five areas provide a framework for creating the wider conditions needed to make Food Systems for Peace a sustained way of working, rather than an approach dependent on individual projects or organisations.

4.1 Develop a shared understanding of Food Systems for Peace

There currently is no sufficiently shared understanding of what Food Systems for Peace means in practice. Developing a common narrative, theory of change and practical guidance could help governments, donors, implementing organisations and research institutions work towards a common agenda while allowing for adaptation to different contexts.

Develop a common narrative and practical approach

A shared understanding would help clarify how food systems and peace interact, what food-system interventions can realistically contribute, and how conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness can be integrated into food systems programming. This should recognise that peace is not a single outcome: depending on the context and level of intervention, relevant peacebuilding outcomes may include reduced tensions, greater trust, cooperation, social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Make peacebuilding an explicit objective

Food security programming may have peace as an implicit assumption or hoped-for co-benefit, whereas a Food Systems for Peace approach makes the peace-related contribution an explicit consideration and objective. This means moving beyond asking whether interventions improve food security and livelihoods, to also considering how they affect relationships, power dynamics, cooperation and conflict. Food-system interventions should therefore be intentionally designed to strengthen trust, cooperation and social cohesion and reduce conflict risks, while recognising the limits of what they can achieve.

Develop indicators that capture both food and peace outcomes

Programmes should be able to assess both food-system outcomes and their effects on trust, cooperation, social cohesion and conflict risks. Equally, peacebuilding programmes should consider their effects on food security, livelihoods and food-system resilience. Relevant knowledge partners, practitioners and donors could work together to develop and test a practical set of context-sensitive indicators, strengthening learning and evidence on what works and building the case for integrated programming.

4.2 Strengthen policies, institutions and incentives behind a food-systems approach

Institutional fragmentation is not only a question of organisational structures; it is also driven by different mandates, incentives and accountability systems. Current structures often favour sector-specific interventions, even when the challenges facing food systems require more integrated responses. Addressing this requires action by governments, donors and implementing and knowledge partners, working across institutional and sectoral boundaries.

Strengthen implementation of existing policies

Many countries already have policies that recognise the importance of food security, resilience and peace. Their implementation is often constrained, however, by weak institutional capacity, fragmented responsibilities and limited enforcement. Decentralisation can create opportunities for more locally responsive governance, but local authorities frequently lack the resources and capacity to fulfil these responsibilities. Government, supported where appropriate by humanitarian, development and peace actors, therefore need to strengthen institutional capacity and create the conditions for policies to be implemented effectively at national and local levels.

Align mandates and incentives

Institutional and organisational incentives need to better support collaboration across humanitarian, development, peace, food-system and trade agendas. This requires creating space for joint planning, shared objectives and collective accountability, rather than expecting actors to coordinate around separately defined programmes. Governments and donors can create the conditions for this by aligning mandates, funding and accountability requirements, while implementing organisations and knowledge partners can work across sectors and disciplines to support more integrated approaches.

Align external support with local realities and priorities

Workshop participants noted that external interventions are often shaped by donor priorities, funding structures and reporting requirements that do not always align with local realities. These approaches can also overlook the ways communities already use food systems to maintain social cohesion and manage tensions.

Donors and implementing organisations should therefore start from local priorities, knowledge and existing capacities, and seek to strengthen what is already working rather than replacing it with externally defined solutions. Local authorities, community organisations and other local actors should be actively involved in shaping these approaches.

4.3 Align funding and financing to support longer-term and adaptive engagement

Funding structures strongly influence how programmes are designed and implemented. Short project cycles, rigid funding conditions and sector-specific funding streams are poorly suited to protracted food crises, where contexts change continuously and strengthening food systems resilience takes time. Longer funding periods alone are not sufficient: programmes also need sufficient flexibility to adapt their activities, priorities and partnerships as contexts and needs change.

Provide longer-term and more flexible funding

Longer-term and flexible funding would allow programmes to adapt to changing conflict dynamics, invest in local institutions and relationships, and connect immediate humanitarian needs with longer-term resilience and peacebuilding. Funding arrangements should therefore provide room for evidence-informed adaptive management, including the ability to adjust activities and resource allocation as circumstances change, while maintaining clear strategic objectives and accountability.

Use funding to incentivise Food Systems for Peace

Donors, including the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, can create stronger incentives by explicitly linking food systems and peace objectives in funding strategies and investment decisions. This also applies to private-sector development: decisions on which businesses, producers and value chains to support should consider not only commercial potential but also their effects on local power relations, inclusion, social cohesion and conflict dynamics.

4.4 Improve coherence between humanitarian, development and peace efforts

Participants emphasised that greater coherence is needed across humanitarian, development, peace and, where relevant, trade and private-sector agendas. Too often these efforts operate in parallel, despite addressing interconnected aspects of the same food-system challenges.

Move beyond parallel responses

More joined-up approaches can help address immediate needs while also strengthening local food systems, reducing vulnerability to conflict and climate-related shocks, and supporting longer-term resilience. This requires actors to work from a shared understanding of the local food system and conflict dynamics, rather than simply coordinating separate sectoral interventions.

Connect resilience and peacebuilding

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, strengthening food systems resilience and strengthening peace are often closely connected. This includes understanding how climate-related pressures can interact with existing vulnerabilities, resource competition and conflict dynamics, and ensuring that efforts to strengthen climate resilience do not inadvertently reinforce inequalities or tensions. It also includes addressing the

conditions that allow peaceful cooperation to endure, including social cohesion, fair resource governance and, where necessary, the rule of law.

4.5 Build partnerships that bring together the right capabilities

Food Systems for Peace cannot be delivered by one type of actor. Effective partnerships need to bring together food-system expertise with knowledge of conflict, peacebuilding, governance and local realities.

Broaden the partnerships involved

Partnerships should bring together governments, local institutions, communities, research and knowledge organisations, humanitarian and development actors, peacebuilding organisations and the private sector. These actors bring complementary knowledge, capacities and relationships: local actors provide contextual knowledge and relationships; humanitarian and development organisations bring experience in responding to shocks and supporting longer-term change; peacebuilding actors contribute conflict and governance expertise; research and knowledge organisations help generate and share evidence; and private-sector actors bring market knowledge and business capacity.

Particular attention should be given to actors with expertise in conflict analysis, peacebuilding and local governance alongside food-system expertise. Organisations with experience across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus can help connect these perspectives and provide integrated frameworks for understanding the social, political and economic factors that shape food-system and conflict dynamics.

Bringing these complementary perspectives together can support more coherent and context-sensitive approaches to food systems, resilience and peace.

Strengthen locally anchored partnerships

Partnerships should provide local actors with meaningful roles in shaping and implementing solutions, rather than relying primarily on external expertise. The Dutch “diamond” model – with government, knowledge institutions, civil society and private sector working together – could provide a useful basis, provided it is locally operationalised and adapted to the realities of fragile and conflict-affected settings.

Embed conflict and governance considerations in partnerships

Partnerships should explicitly consider how their activities interact with local power relations, resource governance and the rule of law. This is particularly important where food-system interventions involve access to land, water, markets, trade or other contested resources.

Workshop insight – Food Systems for Peace requires change beyond individual programmes

The workshop highlighted that Food Systems for Peace cannot become a reality through better programme design alone. The wider system in which programmes operate – its policies, institutional mandates, funding models, incentives and partnerships – needs to support longer-term, locally anchored and adaptive ways of working.

Participants also highlighted that how external actors work can itself shape the prospects for Food Systems for Peace. Donor priorities, short funding cycles, institutional mandates and reporting requirements can unintentionally reinforce fragmented and externally driven approaches, rather than

building on local capacities and ways in which communities already use food systems to sustain cooperation and social cohesion.

The key shift is therefore from adding peace considerations to existing food-system programmes towards creating the conditions in which Food Systems for Peace can become a way of working.

In summary

Making Food Systems for Peace a reality requires changes at several levels: a shared understanding of the concept and how to put it into practice; policies, institutions and incentives that support joined-up approaches; longer-term and more flexible funding; greater coherence across humanitarian, development and peace efforts; and partnerships that bring together the right expertise while putting local actors at the centre.

The final section brings these findings together into a set of key messages and recommendations and considers what they mean for the role of the Netherlands Food Partnership and its partners in advancing the Food Systems for Peace agenda.



5. Key findings and recommendations

The consultations and thematic workshop explored three questions at the heart of a Food Systems for Peace agenda: what can food systems and food-system programming contribute to peace and stability; how can this potential be realised in practice; and what needs to change to make this possible?

The discussions also highlighted that working in fragile and conflict-affected settings requires additional time, resources and flexibility. This has implications for how programmes are designed, funded and implemented, particularly where insecurity, weak institutions and changing conflict dynamics increase the costs and challenges of working effectively.

Overall insight: Food Systems for Peace requires a different way of working

The consultations and workshop point to one overarching insight: Food Systems for Peace is ultimately about changing how we understand and engage with food systems in situations of fragility and conflict – recognising and acting on the potential of food systems and food-systems programming to contribute to peace and stability, while being realistic about their limits and avoiding unintended harm.

Main findings and recommendations

Four main findings and recommendations emerged that together highlight what Food Systems for Peace can offer, what it requires in practice, and what needs to change to make it possible.

1. Food systems can contribute to peace – but have limits

Food systems can support peace by sustaining food security and livelihoods, creating opportunities for cooperation, and strengthening local institutions and relationships. But they cannot address the wider political, security and governance factors that drive violent conflict.

Recommendation: Recognise food systems as an important contribution to peace and stability. Food systems transformation and programming in Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings (FCAS) should seek to strengthen their positive contribution to resilience, cooperation and social cohesion, while being realistic about what food-system interventions can and cannot achieve.

2. A Food Systems for Peace perspective can help operationalise the HDP nexus

Taking a food systems perspective provides a practical entry point for bringing humanitarian, development and peace actors together around a system that directly affects people's lives and livelihoods. It can help move beyond separate sectoral responses towards more joined-up analysis and Food Systems for Peace action.

In practice, however, institutional silos, funding structures and different incentives continue to make this difficult, particularly in protracted food crises where humanitarian responses tend to dominate.

Recommendation: Embrace food systems as a practical entry point for more joined-up HDP-nexus programming, using shared food-system analysis to identify interdependencies, trade-offs and complementary roles, and to prioritise humanitarian, development and peace actions accordingly.

3. Realising the potential requires changing how we work

Food-system interventions in FCAS need to understand both how conflict affects food systems and how food-system interventions affect conflict. This means building on local capacities and institutions, ensuring that different groups can participate, paying attention to power and exclusion, and deliberately looking for opportunities to strengthen resilience, trust and social cohesion.

It also requires approaches that are flexible and able to adapt as circumstances change.

Recommendation: Make conflict sensitivity and peace responsiveness part of food-system analysis, design, implementation and learning from the outset, supported by longer-term, locally anchored and adaptive approaches.

4. Food Systems for Peace requires system-level change and stronger partnerships

More joined-up and adaptive approaches will remain difficult if wider policies, funding mechanisms and institutional incentives continue to favour short-term and sectoral separated interventions. Food Systems for Peace requires greater coherence and collaboration between humanitarian, development and peacebuilding actors, as well as complementary expertise in food systems, conflict, governance and peacebuilding – both in how contexts are understood and how programmes are designed and implemented.

The Netherlands has an opportunity to build on its long-term engagement and partnerships, particularly in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel/West Africa, and to connect Dutch experience and networks with locally led efforts in FCAS. This can also provide opportunities to strengthen knowledge partnerships that connect different forms of expertise and support learning across contexts.

Recommendation: Create greater space for longer-term, flexible and locally led partnerships that bring together complementary expertise and perspectives around shared food-system challenges and opportunities for peace. Partnership models such as the Dutch diamond, bringing together government, knowledge institutions, civil society and the private sector, can provide a useful basis for connecting food-system expertise with conflict, peacebuilding and governance knowledge, while ensuring that locally anchored actors shape priorities and approaches and help translate the Food Systems for Peace approach into practice.

From findings to action

Taken together, the findings point to Food Systems for Peace as a strategic agenda for fragile and conflict-affected settings, where food systems are deeply connected to livelihoods, food security, stability and peace. Further developing this agenda will require building on emerging experience and practice through joint learning, practical experimentation and policy engagement. It will also require partnerships that bring together complementary knowledge, experience and capabilities across conflict, peacebuilding and governance.

Potential role for NFP and its Stability Partnership

The Netherlands Food Partnership and its Stability Partnership is well placed to help connect actors and perspectives, build a shared understanding of Food Systems for Peace, support evidence generation and learning through relevant knowledge partners, and create spaces where government, knowledge institutions, civil society and private-sector actors can learn and act together.

Such knowledge partnerships could draw on complementary expertise from organisations working on food systems, conflict and peace, governance, and data and risk analysis, including universities and other knowledge institutions.

NFP could play a particularly valuable role in facilitating exchange between Dutch actors and locally led food-system and peacebuilding initiatives in fragile and conflict-affected settings, while bringing relevant experience from other contexts into these exchanges.

Advancing the Food Systems for Peace agenda

Food Systems for Peace offers a potentially strategic agenda for fragile and conflict-affected settings, recognising that food systems are closely connected to livelihoods, food security, stability and peace.

Making this agenda actionable will require moving from shared understanding to practical experimentation, evidence and learning, supported by locally led partnerships, adaptive approaches and an enabling policy and funding environment.