

Catalysing academic–humanitarian partnerships for emergency food security response

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Executive summary

This report is an advocacy document that makes the case for stronger collaboration between academic and humanitarian sectors in emergency food security and agricultural livelihood response. The work is based on collected insights across organisations and individuals in the humanitarian sector and academia. The high level of engagement from both sides during the consultations showcases the need for addressing the gap of collaboration between the two sectors.

In responding to agricultural and food security emergencies, humanitarian organisations generate extensive operational data and practical learning. This comes at a time when the sector faces a profound crisis of funding and other constraints.

Humanitarian organisations' work is guided by the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, which are important considerations in how operational data and evidence are generated, shared, and used. Academic institutions generate relevant research and analytical capacity, in which the long-term perspective, as well as academic freedoms and independence, can offer distinct advantages.

Yet these two – the humanitarian sector and academia – remain poorly connected. This report sets out to address that gap: to show, concretely, where and how academic and humanitarian actors can work together more systematically, and what needs to change to make such partnerships more sustainable.

The report is structured in four parts. Following a general introduction in section 1, section two maps concrete opportunities for collaboration, across the humanitarian programme cycle, including evidence synthesis and demand-led primary research, to academic integration within operations, humanitarian integration in university teaching, donor engagement, and networking. Good examples of such collaborations are illustrated in case studies. In section three, the report then turns to barriers to collaboration between the two sectors, which are shaped by differing incentives, timelines, and institutional interfaces. Section four closes with recommendations organised by actor – for humanitarian organisations, academic institutions and donors.

The recommendations highlight the importance of building long-term, equitable partnerships between academic institutions, humanitarian organisations and resource partners to strengthen evidence-informed emergency food security and livelihoods programming. Key priorities include jointly defining research agendas, ensuring flexible funding, building partnerships before crises, strengthening local research leadership and institutional capacity, and translating research into practical operational guidance. Partnerships should focus not only on generating evidence but also on ensuring its uptake to improve humanitarian responses.



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Left: Distributing mobile water tanks to protect livestock's water supply. Deir al Balah, Gaza Strip, August 2026. ©FAO.

1. Introduction

Emergency food security and agricultural livelihood responses are increasingly delivered in contexts of protracted and recurrent crises. Between 2016 and 2025, the number of people facing acute food insecurity increased significantly in crisis-affected countries and territories, with conflict, displacement, climate extremes and economic shocks undermining livelihoods, access to nutritious food and the resilience of vulnerable communities worldwide.[1] Declining humanitarian funding further limits response capacity and raises concerns about the continuity of assistance.[2,3]

At the same time, humanitarian actors face rising expectations for evidence, accountability, and effectiveness in relation to complex agricultural and livelihood interventions. This comes at a time when the humanitarian community is facing several challenges, including legitimacy and funding constraints, as highlighted in the 2025's Humanitarian Reset.[4]

Academic institutions generate relevant research and analytical capacity, while humanitarian actors generate extensive operational data and practical learning. Humanitarian actors are also dedicated to ensuring their work reaches the people most in need as effectively as possible. Connecting these complementary strengths could help make humanitarian action more effective and evidence-informed. Yet these strengths of academia and humanitarian organisations are rarely connected in systematic or timely ways.

Collaboration is constrained by differing incentives, timelines, and funding structures, and by weak institutional interfaces between the two sectors. In practice, barriers or misaligned institutional incentives exist on both sides; humanitarian responders focused on crisis management rarely have the time or access to engage with emerging research, while university researchers may have limited incentives or institutional support to adapt and translate research findings for humanitarian contexts. As such, practical and innovative models for academic–humanitarian collaboration remain underdeveloped, particularly in agriculture responses in emergencies. Research led by local and regional academic institutions, which is central to localisation commitments, also remains particularly limited in these contexts.

These gaps have prompted growing calls for stronger links between universities and humanitarian actors.

There is also growing engagement among various actors, including donors (resource partners) in improving evidence-informed humanitarian action. However, 'evidence' itself carries different meanings and standards of rigour for academic and humanitarian actors, as discussed further in this report. These differences can influence how research is produced, interpreted and applied in humanitarian settings.

Nonetheless, many good examples of collaboration between academia and the humanitarian sector do exist, but still lack any real consolidated overview. This report examines such experiences and practical approaches to strengthening these partnerships. As a backdrop to this report, a few key terms and definitions are presented in Box 1.

Box 1. Terminology and definitions.

- An agriculture emergency intervention or crisis response is the actions taken before, during, and after a crisis to support the livelihoods and associated systems. The livelihoods approach fits within the concept of "saving lives and livelihoods," which is widely recognised by the international humanitarian community as a core aim of humanitarian programming.[5]
- Humanitarian standards refer to the Humanitarian Charter, the Protection Principles, the Core Humanitarian Standard, and other standards, especially related to agricultural emergencies.[6,7,8]
- The term donor is used in this paper implying resource partners providing humanitarian aid and includes governments, organisations, philanthropic foundations, development banks, funds etc. Partnership, country ownership and mutual accountability are important aspects and "Good Humanitarian Donorship"[9] and the "Grand Bargain"[10] are central in this context.



Distribution of seeds and cash assistance 30 June 2026, Mbourtchoulou, Chad. © FAO / GABRIEL FOKOUALBO

1.1. Aim

This report advocates for stronger collaboration between the academic and the humanitarian sectors to strengthen emergency food security and agricultural livelihood responses, grounded in operational realities and concrete examples. It contributes to efforts to improve effectiveness of emergency food security responses through stronger, evidence-informed collaboration between academic institutions and humanitarian actors.

The report outlines areas where there are opportunities for collaboration. It provides examples of how collaboration can look like in practice and theory. The report concludes by summarising key barriers to collaboration, alongside sector-specific recommendations for moving forward with such collaboration.

1.2. Methodology

Insights were collected through the gFSC and outreach to researchers and humanitarian professionals, by e-mail or online consultations. All respondents and co-authors were invited to provide insights and case studies, and comment on a draft version. The work was complemented with a non-exhaustive review of academic and grey literature. The compilation of the paper took place during March-October 2026.

[1] FAO, WFP & GNAFC, 2026

[2] Food Security Cluster Agriculture Working Group, 2026

[3] ALNAP, 2026

[4] IASC, 2025

[5] The text originates in SEADS, 2022.

[6] Sphere Association, 2018

[7] SEADS, 2022

[8] LEGS, 2023

[9] Good Humanitarian Donorship (GHD), 2018, originated in United Nations, 2003.

[10] IASC / Grand Bargain Secretariat, 2021

2. Collaboration opportunities

Collaboration offers mutual benefits, where the humanitarian sector can benifit from academia and academia can benefit from humanitarian actors.

2.1. Knowledge generation for humanitarian action

Humanitarian action can draw on both existing operational and academic knowledge, synthesised to inform decision-making, and new primary research designed to align with humanitarian needs. Humanitarian organisations generate substantial operational data and practical learning, and some are also dedicated to conducting research within their organisations.

Academia can contribute with methodological expertise, analytical capacity, and access to scientific and grey literature.

When combined, the strengths of the humanitarian sector and academia enable more systematic and relevant evidence generation across the humanitarian programme cycle in emergency food security response.

Actors in the humanitarian sector can play a critical role in shaping the research priorities so that they can use the research outputs directly to inform needs assessments, targeting, programme design, monitoring, evaluation, and in other words; adaptive learning across the humanitarian programme cycle. The strongest partnerships tend to start from a clear operational question, rather than from the question of what research academia could contribute. That means the operational question guides what decision needs to be made, what evidence would improve it, how quickly, and which institutional relationship can bring the right research expertise in time. Examples of operationally relevant questions could be "what has driven food insecurity in previous emergencies, which interventions have been effective, and under what conditions? Or, in a geopolitical context, how does a war or conflict in question impact global fertiliser markets and food production, affecting the most vulnerable people elsewhere?"[11] Such analyses can inform programme design.

Because humanitarian principles cannot easily be reduced to quantitative indicators, both the "what" and the "how" of research needs to be examined. For example, the "what" entails the research questions, topics, priorities, evidence gaps, and intended knowledge/outputs, and the "how" means how the research is conducted, i.e. methods, partnerships, participation of humanitarian actors, ethical approach, timing, data collection, amongst other considerations. Clarifying the "what" and the "how" helps to ensure that research agendas remain closely aligned with the most pressing and relevant needs of humanitarian practice, rather than being shaped solely by academic assumptions about what requires investigation.

Partnerships between researchers and humanitarian actors can provide humanitarian programmes with additional analytical capacity and methodological expertise that are often difficult to sustain within operational programmes. This includes evidence synthesis, which consolidates fragmented operational knowledge into coherent insights, while primary research generates new, co-designed data directly aligned with decision-making, programme design, monitoring, evaluation, and adaptive learning. Together, these approaches can help make evidence more credible and actionable by connecting research and analysis to operational priorities, while contributing to a stronger and more robust global evidence base.

To effectively inform humanitarian decision-making, research must also address the complex and interrelated drivers of food insecurity. Crises are rarely driven by a single factor; rather, they emerge from the interaction of conflict, political instability, environmental degradation, climate shocks, epidemics, crop or animal health, and economic pressures.[12] The on-going development of a multi-shock index is an example. (Section 2.1.) Academic–humanitarian collaborations are well positioned to apply interdisciplinary and systems-based approaches to unpack these dynamics, combining qualitative field insights with quantitative tools such as harmonised food security datasets and predictive analytics. For example, academics may be uniquely positioned to apply methodological approaches that identify and analyse the issues that cross-cut food security (conflict, hunger, gender, human mobility, climate etc.) across

[11] IFPRI, 2026

[12] Ayalew & Murray, 2026

contexts and areas of humanitarian practice. Such approaches can improve anticipatory action, targeting, and resilience-building interventions.

In this context, researchers and actors working on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, including those focused on long term development, can help overcome siloed approaches of humanitarian and long-term development support by examining crises through a complexity and fragility lens. By looking beyond immediate needs and short-term interventions, academia can help illuminate the structural, social, political, environmental and institutional dynamics that connect humanitarian and development interventions.

A key aspect is demonstrating how multi-stakeholder collaboration can generate innovations that are both scientifically robust and locally appropriate. Equitable partnerships require investment in local research capacity, shared ownership of data, and fair recognition in publications and funding.

2.1.1. Evidence synthesis for humanitarian action

In emergency food security and agricultural livelihood responses, evidence synthesis enables more systematic analysis and consolidation of knowledge that is often fragmented across projects, regions, and over time. Although much of this material is produced for operational management, donor reporting or other purposes, it contains valuable insights on intervention effectiveness, implementation challenges, and contextual adaptation.

In this way, consolidating fragmented knowledge through evidence synthesis helps identify recurring patterns, strengthen institutional learning, and support more consistent and evidence-informed programming. Outputs can be translated into accessible operational guidance and may also contribute to the broader global evidence base through peer-reviewed publications and shared learning.

Relevant humanitarian information sources for evidence synthesis may include:

- Baseline, monitoring, and endline assessment data
- Post-distribution monitoring, beneficiary feedback, and complaints data
- Programme evaluations and after-action reviews
- Food security and nutrition analyses, e.g. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) data
- Market monitoring and assessments and food security analyses
- Seed system and agricultural livelihood assessments
- Operational reports, situation reports, and lessons learned documents
- Community consultations and qualitative field observations
- Multi-year datasets generated across repeated or protracted crises

Where datasets are sufficiently comparable, meta-analysis[13] can be used to estimate overall effects and identify broader trends. Where evidence is more qualitative or context-specific, narrative synthesis helps consolidate findings, identify themes, and extract operational lessons.

To maximise impact, synthesis efforts need to be co-designed with clear research questions, aligned with decision-making timelines, and translated into concise operational outputs. Donors and institutions can support this through dedicated funding for synthesis activities, open access to



Tahera is a hardworking farmer from Bamyan, Afghanistan. In addition to managing her household chores, she also harvests the wheat when it is ready.
©FAO/HASHIM AZIZI

[13] A statistical method that combines the results of several studies addressing the same research question.

Box 2. Case study: Evidence synthesis on seed system resilience.

The collaboration between SLU and Catholic Relief Services under the Supporting Seed Systems for Development (S34D) initiative demonstrates the value of integrating academic rigor into humanitarian response design.

Upon request for support, SLU contributed dedicated academic expertise, rigour, and time to conduct a systematic literature review on the factors contributing to seed system resilience. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) methodology and had the goal to assemble a robust evidence base for the development of a conceptual framework and response options for "shock-responsive" seed systems. The review drew on 88 systematically selected sources from an initial pool of 523, combining peer-reviewed and grey literature. Access and tools to screen this literature was made possible in part by academic access to subscription-based databases not readily available to humanitarian organisations.

The collaboration highlighted a clear synergy: The Catholic Relief Services contributed operational insight and field-based understanding of seed systems under stress, while SLU provided methodological rigor, systems analysis, and access to global knowledge. The result was a more comprehensive and credible foundation for decision-making, enabling the identification of key characteristics of resilient seed systems and a more refined set of response options. SLU's position as an independent third party was itself an asset, lending the synthesis added credibility and impartiality.[16]

data sets and learning materials, and strengthened partnerships with local and regional academic institutions.

One example of partnership on evidence synthesis has been the collaboration between SLU and the Catholic Relief Services under the Supporting Seed Systems for Development (S34D) initiative. The partnership synthesised dispersed evidence into a structured knowledge base. (Box 2) A related example is SLU's work with CGIAR's *Research Program on Livestock*[14] to review tools and methods for assessing the causal impact of interventions.[15]

Examples of humanitarian-academic partnerships involving FAO include institutional platforms such as the Data In Emergencies (DIEM) platform[17], developed in collaboration with International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)/CGIAR; collaborations with universities in Uganda and South Sudan, and mechanisms through which such collaboration outputs feed into African Union processes (Box 3). The World Food Programme (WFP) has established partnerships with universities to generate evidence-based proposals that contribute to effective, locally led solutions.[18] These partnerships, together with other research networks, illustrate how structured collaboration can generate policy-relevant and operationally actionable evidence. The models also emphasise iterative exchange, secondments, and embedded researchers to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Humanitarian-academic partnerships of the FAO and WFP are also undertaken through gFSC and Clusters provide support and facilitate discussions around standards, technical support, and advocacy. In doing so, the gFSCs have collaborated with various academic actors and research centres including SLU, IFPRI, TUFTS University, Tulane University and Roma Tre University.

Sphere Principles, together with its companion standards, the Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards (LEGS),[21] and the Standards for Supporting Agricultural Livelihoods in Emergencies (SEADS),[22] is itself a product of structured, participatory

[14] https://livestock.cgiar.org/

[15] Hatab & Owusu-Sekyere, 2021

[16] Ibid

[17] https://data-in-emergencies.fao.org/

[18] https://www.wfp.org/academia-and-think-tanks

Box 3. Examples of FAO-academia collaboration to understand the impact of shocks in food crisis contexts, informing policy and decision-making.

- Using FAO DIEM data sets, IFPRI researchers have developed a Multi-Shock Index for increased understanding on how different sequences and combinations of shocks interact to increase household food insecurity.[19]
- The Small grant scheme of the Resilience Africa Network, hosted by Makerere University has enabled African researchers to use FAO data to answer specific questions relevant to emergency responses.
- FAO-academia collaborations support the monitoring under the African Union's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP) - Building Resilient and Sustainable Agri-food Systems in Africa.
- Through the Dutch-funded Food and Nutrition Security Resilience Programme (FNS-REPRO) in the Horn of Africa, for which Wageningen University acts as the so-called Learning Partner, FAO works closely with the University of Juba in South Sudan
- The Emergencies and Resilience Research and Analysis – Working papers series include evidence on the impacts of shocks on agricultural livelihoods for policy and programmatic decision-making.[20]

evidence synthesis. Each is built through technical processes that draw on published research, field evaluation, and expert review[23], and LEGS and SEADS have in particular received strong backing by Tufts University. Academic engagement with Sphere in its current 2026–2028 revision[24] can offer a concrete, low-cost channel through which synthesised evidence reaches humanitarian practice directly.

2.1.2. Humanitarian needs guiding primary research

Strengthening the alignment between primary research (original data, collected specifically for the research question) and humanitarian programming requires co-designed, operationally relevant knowledge generation. This necessitates a shift from externally driven research agendas toward ones that are grounded in operational realities, programmatic needs, and above all in humanitarian principles.

In the context of humanitarian action and food security, primary research may include:

- Surveys, questionnaires, and needs assessments conducted during emergencies, e.g. household food security surveys
- Interviews with focus groups and/or key informants, e.g. with affected communities to gather local knowledge about coping strategies and community priorities, or with humanitarian aid workers
- Field observations, e.g. market conditions, crop production
- Experiments or trials, e.g. randomised controlled trials (RCTs) testing interventions
- Rapid operational analyses, e.g. response-option analyses, or analyses of access and delivery constraints
- Needs assessments conducted during emergencies

A key entry point is to design primary research around the realities of emergency food security decision making, where decisions often need to be made within days or weeks and with imperfect information. Humanitarian actors routinely collect large volumes of data, but much of it remains

[19]IFPRI/FAO 2026

[20]E.g. Democratic Republic of the Congo: Targeting and impact of food aid, cash and in-kind livelihood assistance, 2023–2025. Poncin, 2026

[21]LEGS, 2023

[22]SEADS, 2022

[23]Sphere Association, 2018

[24]Sphere Association, 2026

underutilised for learning and evidence generation.[25]

Partnerships with academic institutions can unlock this potential by supporting rigorous data analysis, developing methodologies for needs assessments, and strengthening causal inference through approaches such as RCTs, which need to be built into an intervention's design from the outset rather than retrofitted onto existing data. For example, recent cluster-RCTs in refugee settings have examined integrated interventions linking climate-smart agriculture and mental health, demonstrating how interdisciplinary research can inform scalable, context-sensitive programming.[26] A relevant example is the collaboration between the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and research partners, including RE:BUiLD (Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development, 2024–2026), run with Stanford's Immigration Policy Lab, Georgetown's University , and Makerere University.[27] Another examples is the a randomised controlled trial on anticipatory cash transfers to smallholder farmers and livestock owners in northeast Nigeria (2021–2023) conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).[28]

Co-design mechanisms can help ensure that research is relevant to operational needs and can increase the likelihood of uptake. This necessitates early engagement between humanitarian actors and researchers, along with resource partners (donors), to jointly define research questions, methodologies, and outputs. In protracted crises, embedded partnerships showed what this can look like in practice. Tufts University's Feinstein International Center partnered with Catholic Relief Services and Concern Worldwide on pastoral livelihoods research in northern Kenya and the Mandera Triangle (through the USAID Nawiri programme and the Irish-funded Hanaano programme), feeding evidence rapidly into decisions and policy over multi-year timelines. In Somalia, Amoud University ran district-wide data collection on livestock mortality and food insecurity, and partnered with ILRI, the University of Liverpool and CIRAD on zoonotic and market-shock research. Academic independence in this work added further value. Researchers were typically able to bring critical distance from donor and operational pressures, including more objective analysis of how funding cuts affected crisis-affected populations. The latter is something humanitarian organisations may be often reluctant, or unable, to produce internally.

Aligning primary research with the humanitarian programme cycle requires flexibility in funding and design. A practical illustration is Cornell University's long-running collaboration with Catholic Relief Services on the Measuring Resilience in Malawi (MIRA) tool, later adapted for use in Madagascar. Cornell continued to provide data management and analytical support after the tool's initial development, which enabled a learning loop to be directly embedded into programme monitoring. (Further information in Section 5).

2.2 Data use, principles and operational uptake

As noted above, a great deal of humanitarian operational data remains underused beyond immediate reporting. Structured collaboration with academic institutions could help to turn these data into more systematic learning products.

Practical measures to ensure other use of operational data could include improving access to anonymised humanitarian data repositories, establishing clearer data-sharing agreements, and creating dedicated mechanisms to link operational programmes with universities and research institutes. Such measures could strengthen analysis without placing additional burdens on operational teams.

Practical collaboration models could include:

- Co-supervised student research projects and practicums linked to ongoing programme
- Researcher placements within humanitarian organisations
- Joint use of anonymised monitoring and evaluation datasets

Data collection could be undertaken by academic researchers and through humanitarian organisations, local humanitarian partners, or trained

[25] For example, Carden, el al., 2021

[26] Hall, et al., 2025

[27] https://rebuild.rescue.org/

[28] https://airbel.rescue.org/projects/impacts-of-anticipatory-cash-to-smallholder-farmers-and-livestock-owners-in-northeast-nigeria/

programme staff, enabling researchers to complement their existing data with primary data routinely generated through field operations.

Engagement with local and regional academic institutions is central to localisation commitments and it appears too often be limited. This call for the inclusion of local academic partners as locally grounded institutions to contribute with contextual knowledge, facilitate access to affected populations, and enhance the ethical and political legitimacy of research findings. Two examples from Sudan illustrate this kind of demand-led, locally grounded research in practice. In Eastern Sudan, SLU and the Agricultural Research Corporation used a market-segmented approach to realign crop research priorities with the needs of different end users, treating humanitarian programmes as one of several priority stakeholder groups alongside smallholders and seed enterprises. The work found that weak alignment between research, delivery systems, and humanitarian demand mattered more than any single technical shortfall.[29] In Darfur, the Feinstein International Center serves as operational research partner within Taadoud, a UK-funded resilience consortium led by Catholic Relief Services, working with the Universities of Al Fashir and Zalingei on natural resource management and livelihoods evidence.[30]

Researchers engaging in humanitarian contexts need also to become more familiar with the standards, guidance, and operational resources already used within the sector. Sphere[31] provides widely used minimum standards and practical guidance for humanitarian response, while the Humanitarian Standards Partnership (HSP)[32] brings together complementary sectoral standards and technical guidance. For emergency food security and agricultural livelihood responses specifically, the Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards[33] and the Standards for Supporting Agricultural Livelihoods in Emergencies[34] provide directly relevant guidance. Developed through similarly evidence-based and participatory processes, these standards merit closer academic engagement.

Closer engagement with existing standards is particularly important because greater attention should be given to translating research findings into actionable humanitarian guidance. Academic outputs are often not designed for operational use, which limits their uptake and influence. At the same time, there can be inherent tension between the independence of academic research and the operational sensitivities of humanitarian action. In some contexts, analysing or drawing attention to political, social, or institutional dynamics may risk undermining the position of humanitarian actors. This can constrain the scope, framing and communication of research findings.

Researchers conducting humanitarian or triple-nexus research, including humanitarian, development and peace aspects, are likely to need more targeted support and guidance to co-produce the types of outputs useful to practitioners. Lessons and experiences can be drawn from existing experiences. An example is the Sahel Resilience Partnership (Box 4, p.14).

Dialogue between academic institutions and international NGOs that have developed operational guidance could help identify what support is needed and at which stages research is most valuable.

More standardised formats for operational briefs, technical recommendations, and practitioner-oriented summaries, aligned where appropriate with humanitarian guidance frameworks, could help ensure that applied research informs humanitarian practice and contributes to the wider evidence base.

2.3. Academic integration in humanitarian operations

One potential approach is to temporarily embed academic experts within humanitarian agencies to address and study specific operational challenges, for example through secondments. An advantage is the direct engagement between the humanitarian field teams and the academic expert. It enables transfer of skills and knowledge in two directions. Repeating this process often can help strengthen the findings and improve their quality with each iteration over time. Because humanitarian operations can be both in protracted and sudden onset

[29] Abdalla, et al. 2026

[30] https://fic.tufts.edu/research-item/taadoud-transition-to-development-project-sharp/

[31] Sphere Association, 2018

[32] https://hspstandards.org/

[33] LEGS, 2023

[34] SEADS, 2022

Box 4. Case study: Sahel Resilience Partnership (2025–2027).

With a focus on food security, a joint research project between the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and GIZ examines how multi-sector partnerships can strengthen resilience and social cohesion across the HDP nexus in the Sahel. The research is embedded within the Sahel Resilience Partnership, which brings together WFP, UNICEF and GIZ. The partnership provides opportunities for collaborative research, field-based data collection, knowledge sharing, and capacity building among international, national, and local actors.[35]

settings, the deployment of academic staff would need to be flexible as to where and when s/he would be available to participate at field level. If academics were placed within a headquarters of a Humanitarian NGO, this would be more feasible but may not provide the same level insights into field realities.

Standing advisory or helpdesk mechanisms can provide demand-driven support to humanitarian actors as needs arise. These are flexible mechanisms where humanitarian staff can rapidly access expertise and be linked to relevant scientist or other professional. These services already exist at SLU and the Gothenburg University, related to the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).[36] Notably, humanitarian actors have also included similar services within their organisations such as WFP's Technical Advisory Groups and technical specialists on cash, anticipatory action, climate, nutrition and needs assessments located within the FAO Office of Emergencies and Resilience and in so-called "Resilience Hubs" in Nairobi, Dakar and Johannesburg.

A related model is university support to national meteorological services for climate forecasting and anticipatory action. Columbia University's International Research Institute for Climate and Society has provided specialised training and technical backstopping to Lesotho's Meteorological Service on seasonal forecasting. This is part of WFP's Improving Adaptive Capacity of Vulnerable and Food Insecure Populations project.[37]

Other examples include the collaboration between WFP and the Sahel University Network (REUNIR) on human development and evidence generation building.[38] It is a network of universities from five African countries to promote the deployment of master's and PhD students from universities to WFP integrated resilience sites to conduct research for their theses. Another example, mentioned earlier (Box 3), included Wageningen University as Learning Partner across a multi-country, multi-year programme, supporting participatory action-learning cycles with FAO and partner staff.

A different model is the International Rescue Committee (IRC), which functions as both an implementing and a research organisation. Its Airbel Impact Lab conducts formative, quasi-experimental and experimental studies in-house, ranging from cash and livelihoods research to full RCTs, drawing on external academic partners selectively rather than routinely.

Academic–humanitarian collaboration can also take place in the opposite direction, with humanitarian organisations providing assistance directly to research institutions. In Ukraine, war damage to agricultural research stations and universities has prompted humanitarian programmes to support the recovery of their operational and extension capacity, recognising these institutions as both partners in, and beneficiaries of, humanitarian response (Box 5).

Strengthening humanitarian actors' internal capacity to design and implement longer-term resilience programming can be supported though

[35]SIPRI, 2025 (SIPRI Food, Peace and Security Programme)

[36]For example, Sida uses different helpdesk functions, such as Sida's Helpdesk for Environment and Climate Change - a demand driven service function, based on a government agency collaboration between Sida, SLU and the University of Gothenburg. https://sidaenvironmenthelpdesk.se/en

[37]https://www.wfp.org/publications/lesotho-improving-adaptive-capacity-vulnerable-and-food-insecure-populations-2020-2024

[38]https://www.wfp.org/publications/wfp-and-reunir-research-results-academic-partnership

Box 5. Case study: Supporting war-affected agricultural research institutions in Ukraine.

Emergency food security and agricultural recovery in Ukraine increasingly depend on stronger cooperation between humanitarian actors and research institutions, but the relationship also runs in reverse: many Ukrainian agricultural research institutions have themselves been damaged by the war through destroyed facilities, lost access to experimental fields, and displaced or lost staff.

Mercy Corps, through the Ukraine Agriculture Support Program (UASP), has supported several such institutions to restore their capacity to advise war-affected farmers. Two illustrate the range of support: the Donetsk State Agricultural Research Station, relocated to Dnipro after losing its original site, and the Institute of Vegetable and Melon Growing in Kharkiv region, whose materials the Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster (FSLC) in Ukraine has used to develop a household-level Seasonal Calendar Guidance Note on climate adaptation. [39] This is a direct example of war-affected research feeding back into humanitarian programming. The link works both ways: research institutions help make humanitarian assistance more evidence-based (this example being an input provided) while during times of conflict they themselves can become recipients of humanitarian support.

training and capacity building provided by academic staff. Areas of support could include data analysis and GIS mapping, monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL), leveraging other data sources, as well as forecasting and predictive modelling. It is worth distinguishing partnerships oriented mainly toward building humanitarian actors' own research and analytical capacity from those oriented towards generating new knowledge and publications with academic partners in the lead. The two serve different purposes and may call for different institutional arrangements.

Many humanitarian organisations have also their own research programmes, where the above-mentioned entry points and mechanisms can be jointly developed, as needed.

2.4. Humanitarian operations informing teaching, curriculum development, and student theses

Universities have an important role in strengthening future capacity for emergency food security and agricultural livelihood response through more dedicated teaching and curriculum development in humanitarian contexts. At the same time, there is a need for humanitarian organisations to engage more actively with academic institutions to help ensure that teaching in universities remains relevant to operational realities and emerging and rapidly shifting humanitarian challenges, as well as responsive to the needs and perspectives of affected populations.

While many agriculture, rural development, and food systems educational programmes address long-term development challenges, few provide structured training on the specific realities of crisis settings, including displacement, conflict, climate shocks, market disruption, and protracted vulnerability. An example of a university that offers humanitarian courses related to emergency agriculture at both undergraduate and postgraduate level is Vienna University of Economics and Business (Wirtschaftsuniversität Wien) with established collaboration with WFP.[40] Others, such as The University of Manchester's Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI)[41], which runs substantial undergraduate and postgraduate collaborations with humanitarian actors, offers programmes in humanitarianism, disaster management and conflict response. Overall, expanding teaching in these areas can help equip graduates with a stronger understanding of the operational, technical, and ethical dimensions of humanitarian response in agriculture and food security. Closer engagement between humanitarian practitioners and academic institutions can hence

[39] Ukraine Food Security and Livelihoods Cluster, 2025

[40] https://www.wu.ac.at/en/the-university/business-and-society/impact-stories/together-against-world-hunger-wu-x-un-wfp

[41] https://www.hcri.manchester.ac.uk/

strengthen the practical relevance of teaching in ways that are difficult to capture through academic literature alone. Through these means students (both degree-seeking students and mid-career professionals in executive or short-course formats) can be confronted with real-world response constraints, operational decision-making and coordination challenges, and scenarios involving multiple stakeholders and competing priorities. Closer engagement in this area, including closer alignment between curricula and employer needs, can strengthen the pipeline of graduates entering the humanitarian workforce.

Examples:

- Practitioner-led lectures
- Guest teaching and lecturers
- Workshops or summer schools gathering humanitarian workers and researchers
- Field case studies and joint development and publication of teaching cases
- Immersive learning experiences such as study abroad courses and practicums
- Co-developed course modules

Educational curricula in universities could further benefit from stronger integration of established humanitarian standards and operational guidance frameworks. The mentioned resources such as Sphere and the Humanitarian Standards Partnership[42] provide practical reference points for teaching on humanitarian response. Embedding these frameworks within university teaching can help bridge the gap between academic training and operational practice, while also increasing student understanding of the interconnected drivers of food insecurity (conflict, climate change, governance failures, displacement, economic shocks, etc.).

A 2024 applied research project by Master's students at the Geneva Graduate Institute, conducted in partnership with Sphere, found that, among the small sample of universities surveyed, humanitarian standards teaching already draws on Sphere but that lecturers and students want more tailored materials, case studies, and support to teach it effectively.[43] Given the limited sample, these findings should be read as indicative rather than representative, but they point to a concrete, low-cost opportunity for closer collaboration between Sphere, LEGS, SEADS and university teaching staff on curriculum materials.

Beyond teaching, the three cases in Box 6 demonstrate how humanitarian organisations collaborate with universities by providing students with real-world research topics, data, mentoring and access to operational expertise, which are integrated into master's thesis programmes. The collaboration creates mutual benefits: students gain practical experience and opportunities to disseminate their research, while humanitarian organisations gain research capacity and evidence that can contribute to learning and improve humanitarian practice.

These examples of collaborations can help shaping future professional capacity in emergency food security and livelihoods programming and also develop more analytical grounded graduates better prepared for a future in either sector.

2.5. Academic alignment with donor priorities on evidence-informed programming and learning

The growing demand for evidence in humanitarian action reflects several interconnected factors and perspectives. Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 when donors/resource partners and operational agencies placed great emphasis on evidence-based humanitarian action, the generation and use of evidence have received increasing attention within the humanitarian sector.[44,45]

This trend has partly been driven by the persistent and widening gap between humanitarian needs and available resources, which puts pressure on both donors and humanitarian organisations to use limited funding more effectively. Donors generally require a better understanding of patterns, synergies, gaps, and opportunities for impact, informing their funding decisions and programme design by highlighting which interventions are most effective, while still providing a principled humanitarian response. Evidence generation helps shape policy choices.

In response to these needs, governments are

[42]Sphere Association, 2018; LEGS, 2023; SEADS, 2022

[43]IHEID/Sphere, 2024

[44]OECD/European Commission, 2025

[45]Obrecht, 2017; LEGS 2023

Box 6. Case study: Examples of humanitarian organisations embedded in masters thesis projects.

- Concern Worldwide works with various university masters programmes (including University of Galway). Following a scoping from country offices and amongst other staff, Concern Worldwide develops a list of topics that require further investigation which are shared with the programme directors in specific masters programmes. The programme director then shares these broad topics with students to determine interest in focusing their master's dissertation on one such theme. Students are assigned a mentor from Concern as well as an academic supervisor from their university and the research question is refined and a methodology developed. They do not get paid, but they can use Concern data and facilities and gain access to stakeholders at the country level via Concern staff. Apart from their dissertation, they must produce a short briefing note on their findings or publish a piece in 'Knowledge Matters', which is a magazine that Concern Worldwide produces with key learning pieces. Research work with University of Galway MA in International Development Practice has involved a scoping review on exploring alternative indices for measuring extreme poverty in Fragile and Conflict-Affected States (FCAS), research on technical and market innovations in the ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTFs) supply chain, investigations on food security and livelihoods in Concern's graduation approach.

- FAO's Data in Emergencies (DIEM) Programme has linked up with Duke University to successfully pilot a module in which DIEM data is analysed and written up as a thesis within the Master in Public Policy Program. Students receive guidance on research questions and analysis from the DIEM team in collaboration with Duke faculty over the course of one semester. The highest quality theses are then shortlisted for publication, and students are supported to give a webinar.

- A comparable model operated in Somaliland, where Save the Children International and Amoud University's College of Health Sciences jointly funded two studentships on acute malnutrition (embedded within Save the Children's "Shifting the Dial on Acute Malnutrition" programme). Research topics were co-designed around the programme's needs, thesis panels combined university faculty and Save the Children research specialists, and supervisors sat on the study's national coordination group so that findings could be potentially fed directly into practice.

increasingly recognising the value of integrating academic expertise into humanitarian support. Academic institutions bring methodological robustness, analytical tools, and empirical research that can help donors ground their priorities in evidence, alongside practical humanitarian expertise.

In collaboration with implementing organisations, academic contributions can support donor priorities across various contexts and areas of humanitarian action. Examples include policy frameworks and operational guidance; needs assessments and food security analysis; participatory approaches and local knowledge integration; adaptive programme design in complex food crisis contexts; strengthening efficiency and accountability; field-based experiments and pilot studies; training, monitoring, evaluation, and learning; and joint learning platforms and embedded expertise. At the strategic level, academics can support the uptake of impact evaluations, analytic studies, and lessons learned in donor agencies' strategy development and implementation.

There are several ways in which donors can support the generation and use of evidence in practice. Sida, for example, is strengthening the generation and use of evidence across its humanitarian, development, and nexus support. (Box 7, p. 18) This could include rapid evidence monitoring for anticipatory action through a dedicated humanitarian foresight function, for example.[46]

Another approach is to support time-sensitive

[46] Pers. communication, Sida

Box 7. Sida's strengthening of evidence and cooperation with academia in humanitarian aid.

At Sida, strengthening the use of evidence and increasing collaboration with universities are institutional priorities and linked to the Swedish Appropriation Directions for the 2026 Budget Year from the Government.[47] Cited "To promote greater effectiveness in development assistance, Sida shall 1) Ensure that scientifically grounded analysis and evidence guide the selection of interventions, so that development assistance can achieve the greatest possible impact….." Among Sida's responses are ongoing consultations with academia regarding the strengthened collaboration on humanitarian aid.

research through dedicated funding mechanisms. The Swedish government, for example, has financed relevant research through specific research funds. One example is a rolling 'urgent grant' mechanism of the Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development[48] which has financed researchers to collect time-sensitive data. One study focuses on agricultural yields in the wake of the 2017 South Asia floods before the evidence window closes.[49]

More broadly, donors may institutionalise their commitment to evidence generation and use through their funding mechanisms. They can require "evidence partnerships" with academic or research institutions as part of funding solicitations, rather than treating them as optional. One example was USAID's Humanitarian Assistance Evidence Cycle (2021–2024) which funded impact evaluations, capacity strengthening and dissemination specifically for humanitarian food security programming.

Overall, aligning research with the humanitarian programme cycle requires flexibility in funding and design. Donors can enable this by supporting adaptive, multi-year research frameworks that evolve alongside programmes, rather than rigid, standalone studies. Embedding learning loops, through which findings continuously inform adaptive management of programme management, helps ensure that research contributes not only to global knowledge but also to real-time operational improvements.

2.6. Networking, exchange and co-creation of knowledge

Networking and exchange between academia and humanitarian actors play a critical role in strengthening evidence-based decision-making, promoting innovative approaches, and fostering the co-creation of solutions.

Because humanitarian organisations are uniquely positioned to identify research questions, grounded in real-world operational challenges, whether through primary research or evidence synthesis, inter-sectoral fora need to be expanded to ensure such dialogues and collaboration can increasingly take place. There are various examples of fora at the country, regional, and global levels, such as the CGIAR-Food Security and Nutrition Hub, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP) and various humanitarian evidence platforms aimed at sharing knowledge, data and scientific insights. (Box 8) These fora facilitate multi-actor collaboration and provide access to expertise, training and evidence-based tools.

The Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Weeks (HNPW) is one of the largest events of its kind, that provides a collaborative space for practitioners and experts from a wide range of humanitarian stakeholders, including academia. For example, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) from the UK organised a dedicated HNPW 2026 session[50] that explored how humanitarian systems can engage more effectively with diverse actors and knowledge networks.

[47]Government of Sweden, 2026; Government of Sweden, 2025

[48]FORMAS (The Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences and Spatial Planning).

[49]Egan, et al., 2023

[50]HNPW https://www.hcri.manchester.ac.uk

The gFSC supports networking by creating a structured coordination space and technical working groups (e.g. Agriculture) where humanitarian actors share information, align activities, build technical experience, broaden relationships, and coordinate response efforts across local, national, and global levels. It engages academia in more indirect and selective ways, through knowledge exchange, technical support, partnerships, and advocacy.[51]

Box 8. ALNAP 's network

ALNAP acts to improve humanitarian action by exchanging evidence, experience and practical ideas across its members. Its networks consist of about 100 members across national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), United Nations agencies, networks, academics, think tanks and bilateral and multilateral donor organisations.[52]



Traditional sorghum storage in Burkina Faso. PHOTO: KOSTAS KARANTININIS, SLU

[51] https://fscluster.org/fsc_agriculture_wg/document/agriculture-saves-lives-urgent-action

[52] https://alnap.org/about/

3. Challenges of academic-humanitarian collaboration

Academic–humanitarian partnerships face several structural barriers. A fundamental challenge is that humanitarian and academic organisations often have different institutional cultures, priorities, incentives and timeframes. Humanitarian actors are typically focused on rapid operational decision-making and improving programme outcomes, whereas academic researchers are expected to generate rigorous, independent knowledge and publish in peer-reviewed journals. These different objectives are not necessarily incompatible, but aligning them requires explicit discussion of expectations, roles and incentives from the outset.

Academic independence is itself a source of value to humanitarian actors. It enables critical, third-party analysis, including of the effects of funding cuts and donor prioritisation, that organisations may be reluctant to produce internally (see Section 2.1.2). However, this same independence can make humanitarian organisations cautious about engaging with academic researchers, particularly where findings may expose weaknesses in programming to donors or the public in an already constrained funding environment. Aligning partnerships therefore requires an honest conversation about whether, and under what conditions, humanitarian organisations are willing to have their work independently and publicly scrutinised.

Timeframes are a particularly important challenge. Humanitarian action is often characterised by rapidly changing needs and short operational cycles, while academic research may require months or years to design, collect and analyse data and publish findings. Evidence produced six months after a particular operational decision may no longer be directly relevant to that operation. At the same time, the pressure for rapid results can make it difficult to generate research that meets academic standards of methodological rigour. Partnerships therefore need to consider different forms and timelines for knowledge generation, including rapid research, iterative analysis and the production of interim findings that can inform programming while more comprehensive research is still underway.

Different incentives and expectations can also create tensions around independence and the use of research findings. Academic researchers may have strong incentives to publish findings, including findings that identify shortcomings or unintended consequences. Humanitarian organisations, however, may be more cautious about making such findings public, particularly when they could affect relationships with donors, affected populations or other stakeholders. This raises important questions about access to organisational data, researchers' independence, confidentiality and the right to publish.

Funding is another persistent barrier. Research is often not prioritised within humanitarian financing, while academic research funding may not correspond to the operational questions and timeframes faced by humanitarian organisations. This can leave limited resources for collaborative, practice-oriented research and for the longer-term relationships needed to build trust between partners. Donor pressure to minimise overhead rates further compounds this, leaving implementing partners with fewer discretionary funds to devote to research, planning and follow-up.

Even where robust evidence is generated, it may not be sufficiently adapted, communicated or integrated into **humanitarian decision-making processes.** That is a lack of conditions for evidence use that is distinct from the barriers above.

A related but distinct problem concerns the **direction and objectivity of the evidence flow.** Most attention focuses on what academia can offer humanitarian actors; although the reverse flow, where operational data and findings feed back into independent research and public scrutiny, is at least as underdeveloped. Donor-funded work carries a structural bias toward reporting success, and decisions about what data or findings to share are typically made by the same actors whose performance they reflect. Community-sourced methodologies such as the People First Impact Method (P-FIM), which now feeds into the ongoing Sphere Handbook revision, offer one model for gathering community feedback that is not filtered through the convening agency's own communications. Even this, however, still depends on humanitarian actors' willingness to let it take place.[53]

Operational and ethical constraints are particularly important in humanitarian settings. Insecurity, rapidly changing contexts and logistical difficulties can limit researchers' access to affected populations and affect the quality and continuity of data. Safeguarding participants, obtaining infor-

[53] https://p-fim.org/

med consent and managing sensitive information are also more complex in crisis contexts. These constraints need to be recognised when designing research partnerships and determining what forms of research are feasible and appropriate.

University **ethical approval processes** are often not designed to accommodate the rapidly evolving and time-sensitive nature of humanitarian settings. Members of ethics committees may also have limited familiarity with the operational realities and ethical complexities of such contexts.

There are **persistent inequalities in knowledge production.** Researchers and institutions in crisis-affected countries remain underrepresented in international research partnerships, despite often having essential contextual knowledge and expertise. This can result in research agendas being shaped primarily by external institutions and can limit local ownership of both the research process and its findings. More equitable partnerships should therefore involve local researchers and institutions not only as data collectors or implementing partners, but as co-designers and co-producers of research. In active conflict settings this inequality can be compounded further: in Ukraine, war damage to agricultural research institutions (including destroyed facilities, displaced staff and lost access to experimental fields) has itself become a humanitarian concern, illustrating how crises can simultaneously erode the very research capacity that response and recovery depend on.



Sumy State University, Ukraina, after the attack on 26 September 2026. The text on the wall says: "Only science will change the world".
PHOTO: DMYTRO KRUKOVETS

4. Recommendations

Today's geopolitical tensions and competing global priorities, alongside growing pressures on humanitarian budgets, reinforce the need for researchers and humanitarian actors to work together to anticipate and respond to food crisis. Data and evidence can help to identify vulnerability, prioritise emergency food security and agricultural livelihood interventions, and improve the effectiveness of humanitarian support. This requires strengthening existing partnerships between humanitarian actors and academic institutions, as outlined above.

To make academic–humanitarian partnerships in emergency agriculture interventions effective and sustainable, enabling factors need to be strengthened and barriers addressed. The recommendations below are a sample aimed towards this end. They focus on the conditions under which partnerships are most likely to succeed, and many apply beyond emergency food security and agricultural livelihoods specifically.

General principles

- **Agree on expectations, roles and incentives early,** including research outputs, operational benefit to emergency agriculture publications, capacity strengthening and timelines.
- **Co-design research priorities from the outset,** jointly across academia, humanitarian partners and affected communities, such as farming, pastoral and fishing communities.
- **Build flexibility into research timelines,** moving where possible toward standing, multi-year relationships rather than one-off grants, which enables studies to adapt to seasonal calendars, lean seasons and shifting access.
- **Establish clear agreements on data, confidentiality,** and publication before work begins.
- **Build partnerships before crises**, not only during them with pre-agreed data-sharing protocols and standing relationships let the right expertise mobilise quickly when a food crisis escalates.
- **Measure evidence uptake, not only evidence production**, i.e. assessing whether findings actually change emergency food security and livelihood programming.
- **Build academic-humanitarian partnership** that also looks beyond immediate needs and short-term interventions, but also help illuminate the structural, social, political, environmental and institutional dynamics that connect humanitarian, development and peace efforts.

For humanitarian organisations

- **Provide dedicated and flexible funding for collaborative research** including through joint, co-managed data hubs, given that vetted academic partners routine access to anonymised operational data.
- **Create mechanisms to connect research with decision-making** such as joint interpretation, regular feedback loops with food security and livelihood programme teams, and practical, timely outputs.
- **Engage in coordination models** such as Food Security Clusters in country are inclusive platforms gathering NGOs, resource partners, authorities and local organizations

For academic institutions

- **Support field placements for early-career researchers,** for example PhD and postdoctoral researchers from crisis-affected regions placed within humanitarian coordination structures for 6-12 months to work on live response problems.
- **Train and recognise translation skills** of researchers who can convert academic outputs into practitioner-facing formats, such as operational briefs and technical recommendations aligned with LEGS and SEADS, alongside publication incentives.
- **Invest in operational fluency,** including familiarity with the realities of fragile and conflict-affected settings, including constraints on field access, long-term measurement, and contingency planning for unplanned disruption in a study.
- **Develop guidance for ethics committees on humanitarian research** such as short briefing notes to support ethics committees in adapting review processes to the realities of humanitarian research in emergency food security and agricultural livelihood contexts, while maintaining appropriate standards.



Data collection: Face-to-face household surveys. Interview conducted in Zhob district in Balochistan province, Pakistan. ©FAO

For resource partners

- **Require evidence partnerships within funding solicitations** rather than treating them as optional.
- **Enable resources for knowledge translation, dissemination and uptake** which goes beyond data collection and research outputs.

Across both academic and humanitarian institutions

- **Promote equitable partnerships and local research leadership** where researchers and institutions from crisis-affected countries are equal partners (i.e. agenda-setters, principal investigators, and data owners); not only sources of contextual knowledge or field access.
- **Invest in long-term relationships and institutional capacity** that outlast individual projects, and that strengthen national research and food security institutions.
- **Organise joint symposia between universities and humanitarian organisations** to showcase existing collaborations and more broadly strengthen ties between academic institutions and humanitarian actors.
- **Promote knowledge brokers** who bring the diverse groups together, clarify what evidence is needed, help researchers understand operational constraints and support humanitarian organisations in interpreting and applying research findings.
- **Recognise the added value of third-party validation** even where a humanitarian organisation's own internal research capacity is already strong, an external academic partner can add independent credibility and increase stakeholder confidence in findings.

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