

Lesson Learnt CP-FS Integrated Programming in Humanitarian Action



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Introduction

The Global Child Protection and Food Security Initiative by Plan International, the Child Protection Area of Responsibility and the Global Food Security Cluster aims to improve collaboration between child protection and food security sectors in order to ensure children's healthy development and wellbeing. Supported by the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) and the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO), the initiative seeks to bridge gaps between the Child Protection (CP) and Food Security (FS) sectors by fostering integrated programming approaches.

Currently a global hunger crisis is driven and exacerbated by mainly the climate crisis and climate change and conflicts. Children are one of the most affected groups. Humanitarian actors report that children and families are resorting to extreme negative coping mechanisms to survive. At its core, the CP-FS initiative recognizes the reciprocal relationship between food insecurity and child protection risks. Food insecurity often exacerbates child protection concerns such as child labour, child marriage, and exploitation. Conversely, child protection risks can hinder access to food, impacting overall food security for vulnerable populations. The initiative focuses on developing technical tools and resources, generating evidence, highlighting the impact of food insecurity on children's protection and strengthening capacity that enable practitioners from both sectors to work collaboratively, ensuring holistic and effective responses.

In fact, the Child Protection and Food Security (CP-FS) toolbox was imagined as a proactive recognition of the interdependence between CP and FS as well as the gaps in knowledge on causal linkages between the two. While it is evident that food insecurity exacerbates child protection risks such as child labour, child marriage, and exploitation, the reverse relationship—how child protection programming impacts food security—remains underexplored and under-addressed. The CP-FS Toolbox is designed to bridge this gap by providing tools to guide practitioners in designing, implementing, and monitoring integrated programs.

The Toolbox is a key component of the CP-FS Global Initiative, aiming to address the complex and interconnected challenges of food insecurity and child protection risks in humanitarian contexts. The present document captures the lessons learned during the toolbox development process, which included consultations at global, regional levels, with English and French-speakers, incorporating country inputs from several inter-agency CP-FS workshops that have taken place in different contexts such as Bangladesh (Cox's Bazar), South Sudan, CAR, Nigeria and key informant interviews. It aims at emphasizing the importance of reversing the prevailing trend of "learning by doing" without documenting outcomes. By sharing these insights, we aim to establish a culture of evidence-based learning and improve the effectiveness of integrated CP-FS programming globally.

Summary of programmatic learnings

The development of the CP-FS Toolbox emerged from the urgent need to strengthen collaboration between child protection and food security actors. In humanitarian contexts, food insecurity often exacerbates child protection risks, such as child labour, child marriage, and exploitation. Recognizing these interconnections, humanitarian actors working in food-insecure settings highlighted missing technical guidance and support to design integrated programs that address these overlapping challenges. The CP-FS Toolbox was envisioned as a resource to enable practitioners to align efforts, achieve shared outcomes, and enhance the safety and well-being of children and families.

The process of developing the toolbox has highlighted critical programmatic challenges and opportunities inherent in integrated programming. First, it became evident that foundational knowledge between the CP and FS sectors is uneven. CP practitioners often lack familiarity with food assistance mechanisms, nutrition indicators, and livelihoods programming. Similarly, FS actors frequently lack understanding of CP risks, such as violence, abuse, and neglect, and the specific interventions needed to mitigate these risks, such as psychosocial support and case management. This disparity highlights the necessity of cross-sector capacity strengthening to encourage a shared understanding and improve collaborative efforts.

Programmatically, the development process revealed the complexity of aligning targeting strategies, goals, and monitoring frameworks across sectors. CP programs typically focus on individual children, while FS interventions target households, which can lead to siloed approaches

failing to address shared risks holistically. The toolbox development process emphasized the importance of practical tools—such as Theory of Change templates and shared assessment methodologies—to align interventions, ensure relevance to identified risks, and bridge these divides.

Additionally, the initiative highlighted significant gaps in evidence, particularly regarding how CP interventions can positively impact food security outcomes. While much evidence exists on the ways food insecurity drives child protection risks, the reciprocal relationship remains under-explored. This lack of data has accentuated the importance of systematically documenting programming examples and building an evidence base that can inform advocacy efforts and support the case for integrated approaches within global humanitarian frameworks.

Engaging stakeholders throughout the process has reinforced the need for adaptability. The CP-FS Toolbox must remain flexible to accommodate diverse humanitarian contexts while retaining its core focus on addressing shared risks and improving outcomes for children and families. Stakeholders also emphasized the importance of advocacy and political buy-in to ensure the success of integrated programming, particularly at the policy level.

These programmatic learnings will guide the continued refinement and operationalization of the toolbox during the testing phase and advance the overall CP-FS global inter-agency initiative. By documenting lessons learned and building a repository of evidence, the CP-FS Toolbox aims to become a dynamic resource that evolves alongside the changing needs and realities of humanitarian contexts.





Way forward

Building on the insights gained during the development of the CP-FS Toolbox, the way forward must focus on operationalizing and refining the tools while fostering deeper collaboration between child protection and food security actors. The toolbox is not an end but a starting point for a broader movement toward integrated programming that addresses the root causes and impacts of food insecurity and child protection risks.

The testing phase will be a critical opportunity to evaluate the toolbox in diverse contexts, gathering feedback from practitioners and documenting real-world applications. This phase will both refine the tools and contribute to a growing body of evidence on integrated programming. Stakeholders are encouraged to actively document lessons learned, share case studies, and provide feedback to ensure the toolbox remains adaptable and relevant.

Advocacy will play a central role in the future. Raising awareness among policymakers, donors, and humani-

tarian stakeholders about the benefits of integrated CP-FS programming is essential for securing political buy-in and encouraging a supporting environment. Advocacy efforts should emphasize the reciprocal relationship between food insecurity and child protection risks and highlight the need for coordinated, evidence-based interventions.

Additionally, addressing the gaps identified in evidence and capacity is a priority. This includes developing context-specific program models, piloting innovative approaches, and building robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks that capture the compounded outcomes of integrated programming. Capacity-building initiatives should continue to focus on fostering mutual understanding between CP and FS actors, ensuring that all practitioners have the knowledge and tools needed to collaborate effectively.

The CP-FS Toolbox represents a significant step toward integrated programming, but its success will depend on the collective efforts of humanitarian actors to embrace a culture of learning, adapt tools to their contexts, and advocate for systemic change.

Capacity Strengthening

Basic concepts of FS and CP are not clear for the other actors/sectors (main interventions, risks)

A key challenge highlighted during the development of the CP-FS Toolbox was the lack of mutual understanding and collaboration between CP and FS practitioners. CP professionals often lack familiarity with FS interventions, such as food assistance mechanisms, food security indicators, and livelihoods programming. Without this understanding, CP actors may struggle to identify how FS interventions can address underlying vulnerabilities that increase child protection risks. Conversely, FS actors may have limited awareness of CP concepts, including critical risks like violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation, and the interventions used to mitigate these risks, such as case management and psychosocial support.

This knowledge gap stresses the need for more robust and targeted capacity strengthening of staff across both sectors. Capacity strengthening should focus not only on building foundational knowledge of the other sector's tools, indicators, and programming approaches but also on promoting a shared understanding of how CP and FS intersect and build intersectoral applicable skills and competences. For example, FS staff should be trained to recognize signs of child protection risks during food distributions or cash transfer programs, while CP practitioners should learn to incorporate FS indicators when assessing vulnerabilities in children and families.

Additionally, training programs must go beyond basic information-sharing to point out practical skills and collaboration techniques. This includes equipping practitioners with the ability to design integrated projects, harmonize monitoring frameworks, and use shared data to inform programming. By investing in comprehensive capacity-building efforts, organizations can bridge the gap between sectors, ensuring that both CP and FS practitioners are well-prepared to work together in addressing the complex and interrelated challenges faced by children and their families in crisis settings.

Who is responsible for CP mainstreaming in FS programming?

Another critical gap identified during the development of the CP-FS Toolbox is the absence of clearly defined responsibilities for mainstreaming child protection aspects within food security programming and viceversa. This lack of clarity often results in missed opportunities for collaboration and an incomplete response to the full spectrum of risks faced by children in food-insecure contexts. Moreover, the concept of integrated CP-FS programming itself is not well-defined, contributing to significant ambiguity about what such integration should look like in practice. This blurriness extends to the identification of key actions required to ensure effective integration.

For example, practitioners may struggle to differentiate between mainstreaming CP considerations within FS

programming and delivering integrated CP-FS interventions. This confusion often leads to fragmented efforts, where CP and FS components are implemented in parallel rather than cohesively. Moreover, children are not consistently prioritized under broader protection mainstreaming activities, further compounding the issue. Without a clear understanding of what integrated programming requires, teams may overlook critical actions such as joint targeting of vulnerable households and children, alignment of outcomes, or the design of cross-cutting interventions that address both CP and FS objectives simultaneously.

The ambiguity is deepened by the lack of practical guidance and standardized frameworks to operationalize CP mainstreaming within FS interventions. As a result, practitioners are left without clear directives on how to identify and mitigate CP risks within FS programming, such as ensuring that food assistance distributions are safe and accessible for children or integrating protection-sensitive approaches into cash transfer programs.

Concepts of integrated CP-FS programming are not well defined and agreed upon

The concepts of integrated CP-FS programming remain as well poorly defined and lack consensus among practitioners and organizations, creating a significant barrier to effective implementation. While the idea of integration implies a cohesive approach to addressing child protection and food security risks and outcomes, there is no universally agreed-upon definition or framework to guide practitioners. This lack of clarity leads to diverse interpretations of what integrated programming requires—ranging from merely coordinating activities between CP and FS sectors to fully harmonizing objectives, interventions, and outcomes into a single, cohesive program. Without a shared understanding, integration efforts risk being ad hoc, fragmented, or inconsistent, which weakens their potential impact.

Moreover, the absence of clear and universally agreed-upon definitions significantly impacts all stages of the program cycle. While the Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS) provide a definition of integrated programming, this definition is not consistently unpacked or clarified for practical application across different stages and for various actors. During planning and assessment, practitioners often struggle to pinpoint how CP and FS risks intersect in specific contexts or how to collect and analyse data that captures these linkages. In implementation, the lack of shared understanding can lead to activities that are complementary but not fully integrated, with CP and FS actors addressing separate aspects of vulnerability in parallel rather than working collaboratively to tackle root causes. Similarly, monitoring and evaluation frameworks may miss capturing the compounded outcomes of integrated interventions because there is no consensus on which indicators to use or how to measure success. This highlights the need for operationalizing the CPMS definition, ensuring it informs actionable guidance at every stage of programming.

Linkages between CP and FS are not widely known

The linkages between CP and FS are not widely recognized or understood by practitioners and decision-makers across both sectors, despite the profound impact that food insecurity can have on children's safety and well-being. Food insecurity is a significant driver of child protection risks, creating environments where children are more vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, and harmful coping mechanisms. For instance, families experiencing severe food shortages may resort to child labour, child marriage, or other negative strategies to cope with economic pressures, exposing children to physical and emotional harm. In these situations, the inability to access adequate food is not just a nutrition issue but a trigger for surging protection risks that compromise a child's safety and development.

The limited awareness of these linkages leads to fragmented programming, where FS interventions focus only on alleviating hunger, without addressing the accompanying protection risks, while CP programs fail to incorporate FS considerations as part of their strategies to reduce harm. This siloed approach misses critical opportunities to create more holistic interventions that address both immediate needs and root causes and vulnerabilities.

Way forward

Evidence consistently highlights that collaboration between CP and FS actors and the implementation of integrated programs can significantly improve outcomes for children's protection and well-being. Despite this, in many contexts, such collaboration remains limited. CP and FS staff often lack awareness of each other's interventions, program locations, and methodologies, leading to missed opportunities for synergy and a fragmented approach to addressing children's needs. Bridging this gap will require targeted efforts to foster mutual understanding, shared learning, and coordinated action across the sectors.

To address the challenges highlighted, the CP-FS Toolbox includes training modules specifically designed to build foundational knowledge across both sectors. These modules are versatile and can support sessions tailored for CP actors, FS actors, or joint sessions for both sectors, as successfully piloted in interagency country workshops. The resources offer clear definitions of key terms, roles, and responsibilities, and practical guidance for CP mainstreaming in FS programs. They complement the key competency frameworks already in use for FS actors, creating a comprehensive approach to cross-sector collaboration. However, these resources are just the beginning—sustained investments in staff capacity are essential to ensure these efforts have lasting impact. Future capacity-strengthening initiatives should emphasize the bidirectional relationship between CP and FS, underlining how food insecurity profoundly affects children's protection while also recognizing the ways child protection risks can exacerbate food insecurity.

Currently, there are still notable gaps in the availability of detailed examples of successful cross-sector training programs and tools to measure the effectiveness of capacity-building efforts in integrated CP-FS programming. Addressing these gaps will necessitate a proactive approach to gathering practical examples from ongoing programs and piloting innovative training initiatives. For example, sharing evidence from contexts where CP and FS actors have successfully collaborated can serve as a blueprint for others. Similarly, piloting models that foster integrated training approaches and tracking their impact on program quality can provide invaluable insights.

Experimentation and documentation will be key to this effort. By testing different training models and rigorously evaluating their outcomes, practitioners will be able to identify strategies that most effectively enhance cross-sector capacity and collaboration. Furthermore, developing robust evaluation frameworks to measure the impact of these capacity-building activities will ensure that the lessons learned translate into refined approaches and better programmatic outcomes.



Planning and assessment

CP and FS actors rarely work together to address shared issues

The planning and assessment phase of integrated programming often is emblematic of the significant lack of collaboration between CP and FS actors, who frequently operate in silos. This separation limits the ability to identify shared risks and opportunities for joint interventions, as each sector tends to focus on its own priorities, without fully considering the interconnected nature of the challenges they aim to address. For instance, CP assessments may fail to incorporate data on how food insecurity contributes to risks like child labour, child marriage, or neglect, while FS data collection often omits critical protection outcomes, such as the safety and well-being of children within food-insecure households.

The absence of collaboration in addressing these shared issues results in missed opportunities. CP and FS actors rarely engage in joint data collection or analysis, and there are limited examples of integrated assessments that account for the intersections between the two sectors. This gap hampers the ability to develop a holistic understanding of vulnerabilities and risks, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of interventions. Strengthening collaboration during the planning and assessment phase is essential to ensuring that programs address the full spectrum of needs and risks faced by children and families in crisis settings. Establishing joint planning mechanisms, sharing data, and conducting integrated assessments are critical steps toward bridging this divide and fostering more impactful programming.

CP and FS data available and ways to gather data

The FS sector benefits from a wealth of standardized tools and approaches for data collection and analysis, such as the routine indicators included in the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC). These tools enable the FS sector to produce large volumes of data and detailed analyses that are widely comparable across regions. However, they rarely incorporate child protection (CP) indicators, limiting their utility for integrated programming. Furthermore, FS data is typically gathered at the household level, which poses challenges for CP practitioners who require individual-level data disaggregated by age and sex to assess risks and vulnerabilities accurately. The lack of such granularity in FS data makes it difficult for CP actors to utilize these datasets effectively.

Conversely, CP assessments often rely on qualitative methods that are less standardized and not easily harmonized with the quantitative approaches prevalent in FS data collection. CP data is usually more narrative-driven, focusing on specific cases, protection risks, or psychosocial well-being, and lacks the consistency needed for seamless integration with FS analysis. Additionally, FS data often includes sensitive economic information, which may not always be publicly available or shared across sectors due to confidentiality or policy restrictions, further complicating collaboration.

This divergence in data types and methodologies creates a significant barrier to joint programming and integrated assessments. To address these challenges, there is a pressing need to develop tools and protocols that align CP data collection with FS methodologies – a gigantic effort, on which pathway this toolbox is just the first step. Efforts should also focus on making FS data more accessible and usable for CP actors, including disaggregating household-level data to better reflect individual vulnerabilities. Establishing shared indicators and collaborative data analysis processes will be key to closing this gap and enabling more effective CP-FS integration.

Limited joint assessments

The lack of alignment in data collection methodologies between CP and FS sectors is compounded by the limited joint activities conducted to bridge this gap. Collaborative efforts, such as joint data collection, shared analysis, or integrated assessments, are rare, even though these activities are critical to identifying overlapping risks and vulnerabilities. This disconnect often results in parallel datasets and analyses that fail to capture the nuanced intersections between food insecurity and child protection risks. For instance, while FS assessments may highlight areas of acute food insecurity, they do not often investigate how this insecurity translates into protection risks, such as increased child labour or exploitation. Similarly, CP assessments rarely include quantitative measures of food insecurity, leaving critical connections unaddressed.

Joint activities could enable a more holistic understanding of vulnerabilities, fostering a shared narrative that informs integrated programming. By pooling resources and expertise, CP and FS actors can conduct assessments that reflect the full spectrum of risks faced by children and families. Collaborative approaches to data collection and analysis would also allow practitioners to identify shared priorities, design better-targeted interventions, and monitor the impact of integrated programs more effectively. Establishing mechanisms for joint activities, such as shared assessment tools, cross-sector training, and data-sharing agreements, will be essential for breaking down silos and enabling meaningful collaboration between the CP and FS sectors.

Sectoral needs assessment can limit the understanding of intersectoral linkages

Sectoral needs assessments, while essential for understanding the specific challenges within CP and FS, can accidentally limit the identification of linkages between the two sectors. By focusing narrowly on sector-specific priorities, similar assessments often overlook the complex ways in which FS and CP risks intersect. For instance, an FS needs assessment might highlight food shortages and coping mechanisms without considering how these shortages increase protection risks for children, such as child labour or child marriage, if these are not explicitly mentioned as coping strategies. Similarly, a CP assessment might identify risks like neglect or exploitation but fail



to examine how these are exacerbated by household food insecurity or lack of livelihoods.

To address these blind spots, strong desk reviews are a critical first step in identifying existing data gaps and determining where additional data collection is necessary. Desk reviews allow practitioners to consolidate existing information from both sectors, providing a baseline understanding of the context and potential linkages. By analysing reports, surveys, and secondary data from CP and FS assessments, practitioners can pinpoint areas where integrated programming is likely to have the most impact.

Desk reviews also help avoid duplication of efforts and ensure that additional data collection is targeted and efficient. For example, if existing FS data already provides insights into household vulnerabilities, CP actors can focus their assessments on understanding the protection risks linked to those vulnerabilities, rather than duplicating FS efforts. By grounding assessments in comprehensive desk reviews, integrated programming can be more effectively informed, ensuring that the connections between food insecurity and child protection are adequately addressed from the outset. Establishing a culture of collaborative desk reviews and cross-sectoral data sharing will be key to enhancing the planning and assessment phases of integrated CP-FS programs.

Way forward

The toolbox offers practical templates for conducting integrated assessments and joint analyses, fostering collaboration between CP and FS practitioners from the earliest stages of programming. It also highlights the importance of thorough desk reviews to identify existing data gaps and avoid duplication of efforts. By highlighting these collaborative approaches, the toolbox aims to ensure that assessments capture the full spectrum of risks and vulnerabilities, paving the way for more effective and targeted program design.

However, significant gaps remain in the availability of examples of joint CP-FS assessments conducted in diverse contexts and the absence of clear guidance on harmonizing qualitative CP data with the quantitative approaches commonly used in FS assessments. To address these challenges, the way forward involves actively gathering examples of integrated assessments, experimenting with new methodologies, and creating tools that facilitate collaboration. Developing evidence-led guidance on how to effectively harmonize CP and FS data collection and analysis will be critical to overcoming these barriers and enabling practitioners to design interventions informed by a holistic understanding of needs and risks.

Design, implementation and monitoring

Limited actions of FS to ensure programs are safe and accessible for children

A key challenge in FS programming is the limited focus on ensuring that interventions are safe and accessible specifically for children. By taking the household as the primary unit of response, FS programs often overlook the unique food needs of children during assessments and fail to investigate how these needs are met within the household. This approach assumes that resources distributed to households will naturally benefit all members equally, including children, but does not account for potential intra-household dynamics that may deprioritize children's nutritional and food security needs.

Additionally, FS programs rarely assess or monitor the accessibility and safety of their responses for children. For example, food distribution sites may be physically or socially inaccessible to children, particularly those from marginalized groups, or may inadvertently expose them to protection risks such as exploitation or harassment. Monitoring frameworks often lack indicators to evaluate whether children are benefiting directly and safely from FS interventions.

Addressing these gaps requires integrating child-specific considerations into FS programming. This includes developing assessment tools that capture children's unique food needs, establishing safeguards to ensure their equitable access to resources, and monitoring the safety and effectiveness of FS interventions for children.

Limited integrated CP-FS programming tools, models and approaches available

Before the development of the toolbox, the design and implementation of integrated CP-FS programs were significantly hold back by the limited availability of practical tools and models to support such efforts. Existing programming largely addressed CP and FS risks in isolation, with minimal attempts to align interventions across the two sectors. This siloed approach overlooked the interconnected nature of CP and FS challenges, failing to capitalize on the potential synergies between them. As a result, opportunities to deliver more holistic and impactful programs that could better address the needs of children and families were often missed. The toolbox aims to fill this gap by providing practical resources to guide the development and execution of integrated programming.

Additionally, the absence of robust program models and approaches designed to prevent and respond to child protection risks and negative coping mechanisms associated with food insecurity remains a significant gap in integrated CP-FS programming. Food insecurity often drives families and children to adopt harmful coping strategies, such as child labour, child marriage, transactional sex, or withdrawing children from school. These responses, while aimed at managing immediate economic pressures, expose children to severe protection risks and long-term harm. Despite this clear link, there is a lack of well-documented and tested programmatic approaches that directly address these connected challenges.



Current programming tends to treat CP risks and food insecurity as separate issues, missing opportunities to develop holistic interventions that address the root causes of both. For example, while FS programs may provide immediate relief through food assistance or cash transfers, they often fail to include complementary measures such as psychosocial support or positive parenting programs to mitigate the protection risks associated with economic stress. Similarly, CP programs rarely incorporate components that address food insecurity, even when it is a driving factor behind the risks they aim to address.

To fill this gap, there is an urgent need to design, pilot, and document integrated program models that explicitly link CP and FS interventions. These models should include prevention strategies, such as livelihoods support and education, to reduce the likelihood of harmful coping mechanisms, as well as response mechanisms, such as case management and referral pathways, to support children and families already at risk.

Unclear understanding of how interventions contribute to solving an issue

Defining shared problems and outcomes is moreover a critical step in developing integrated CP-FS programming, yet it is often hindered by an unclear understanding of how interventions contribute to addressing complex, interconnected issues. Practitioners from both sectors frequently struggle to articulate the specific problems they aim to solve collaboratively, as well as the outcomes they hope to achieve. This lack of clarity can lead to the selection of interventions that are sector-specific or misaligned with the broader goals of integrated programming. As a result, programs may fail to address the root causes of child protection risks linked to food insecurity or to achieve meaningful, sustainable impact.

To address this challenge, the development of a Theory of Change (ToC) and a problem/solution tree can provide a structured approach to ensure interventions are relevant and effective. A ToC maps out the causal pathways from identified problems to desired outcomes, making the logic behind program design explicit. Similarly, a problem/solution tree helps break down complex issues into manageable components, allowing practitioners to pinpoint shared risks and define interventions that address both CP and FS needs simultaneously. These tools facilitate a more strategic selection of activities and ensure that programming moves beyond isolated sectoral responses.

The process of defining shared problems and outcomes also requires practitioners to step out of their disciplinary silos and adopt a holistic perspective. By recognizing the interconnectedness of CP and FS challenges, teams can avoid the pitfall of viewing every issue through the lens of their sector alone—a phenomenon akin to the saying, “If you only have a hammer, every problem is a nail.” Instead, integrated programming must draw from a diverse toolbox, leveraging complementary interventions that address the

multifaceted realities faced by children and families in crisis settings. This approach ensures that programs are not only relevant to the identified issues but also effective in achieving lasting change.

Targeting strategies differentiate in unit of analysis

One of the significant challenges in developing integrated CP-FS programming is the divergence in targeting strategies between the two sectors. Child Protection programs typically focus on individual children, identifying specific risks and vulnerabilities, such as violence, abuse, exploitation, or neglect. Conversely, Food Security interventions generally target entire households, aiming to ensure overall food availability and access. This difference in the unit of analysis often results in fragmented approaches, where certain vulnerable individuals—especially children—may be overlooked. The lack of coordination between sectors in developing joint targeting criteria exacerbates this issue.

Key learnings from this process underscore the importance of combining approaches to address both household and individual needs. Integrated programming should involve targeting families with food security interventions, while also concurrently identifying and addressing the specific risks faced by children within those families. It is critical to establish geographic overlaps as a baseline, alongside developing shared vulnerability and targeting criteria during the proposal phase. For instance, using tools like IPC/CP classifications for geographic targeting while incorporating individual-level vulnerability criteria, such as risks related to child labour or child marriage, can help ensure no vulnerable children are left behind.

Collaboration between CP and FS actors is essential for this approach. However, current practices reveal that CP and FS practitioners often work in silos, with limited knowledge of each other's targeting methods. To address this gap, sharing information across sectors, conducting joint targeting exercises, and leveraging local actors are crucial. Local stakeholders, such as community leaders and grassroots organizations, possess valuable insights into vulnerabilities at both the household and individual levels. Their involvement can enhance the inclusivity and relevance of targeting strategies.

Moreover, the targeting process must adhere to principles of inclusivity, evidence-based decision-making, and community validation to ensure programs are both effective and contextually appropriate. While the integration of strategies adds complexity, it also creates opportunities to maximize program impact. Strengthened coordination, complemented by streamlined and context-sensitive targeting frameworks, will enable CP-FS programs to address the full spectrum of needs faced by children and their families in food-insecure settings. Through joint workshops, integrated planning sessions, and collaborative use of tools, practitioners can build a shared understanding and ensure the efficacy of integrated programming.



Feasibility conditions are not always fulfilled

Effective implementation of integrated CP-FS programs requires careful consideration of both the conditions under which they are started, and the expertise involved in delivering them. The conditions for starting integrated programs vary significantly between slow-onset and rapid-onset crises. In rapid-onset emergencies, the priority should be meeting immediate needs, which can limit the time and resources available for developing integrated approaches. In these contexts, integration does not yet seem feasible, and the recommendation would be to barely ensure mainstreaming and alignment of CP and FS responses. Conversely, in slow-onset crises, there is typically greater capacity for joint planning, assessment, and capacity-building efforts, enabling the design of more comprehensive and sustainable integrated interventions. Recognizing these contextual differences is critical for the feasibility and scope of integrated programming.

Another key learning is the importance of implementing quality interventions with the right CP-FS expertise. Effective integrated programming requires recognizing and leveraging the unique expertise of CP and FS practitioners to address shared challenges. This involves engaging key personnel who understand the risks and opportunities at the intersection of CP and FS, as well as promoting collaboration between sectoral actors. Building multidisciplinary teams, providing cross-sector training, and involving local experts who are familiar with the context are essential to ensuring that interventions are both relevant and impactful.

Way forward

The toolbox addresses the mentioned challenges by offering Theory of Change templates, targeting guidance, and implementation checklists, equipping practitioners with tools to define shared outcomes, align targeting strategies, and ensure programs are both safe and accessible for children. These resources lay the groundwork for more effective integration of CP and FS interventions. However, the way forward involves further efforts to develop and test context-specific program models. This includes piloting individual-level assessments within food security interventions, an approach that some agencies are already exploring, to enable better disaggregation of needs and ensure that vulnerable children's requirements are adequately captured.

Additionally, testing the tools provided in the toolbox and incorporating the learning into its future iterations is critical. As a living document, the toolbox is designed to evolve with practice, integrating feedback and new evidence to strengthen its utility. Expanding expertise and capturing lessons learned during the testing and implementation phases will be essential for building a robust foundation of knowledge and refining the tools to address diverse contexts effectively. These steps will help fill the current gaps, such as the lack of context-specific joint targeting strategies and limited evidence on the effectiveness of integrated CP-FS interventions in different settings.

Evidence and learning

Underexplored linkage between child protection and increased food insecurity

Currently, most of the available evidence highlights how food insecurity exacerbates child protection risks, with well-documented examples demonstrating that economic hardship and insufficient access to food can lead to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, child marriage, and dropping out of school. These findings have significantly advanced our understanding of the direct and indirect impacts of food insecurity on children's safety and well-being, enabling targeted interventions to mitigate these risks. However, the reverse relationship—how child protection risks and vulnerabilities influence food security outcomes—remains significantly underexplored.

Children facing protection risks, such as abuse, neglect, or exploitation, are often in environments where their access to adequate nutrition and livelihoods is compromised. For instance, children removed from school due to violence or exploitation may lose access to school feeding programs, which are a critical source of nutrition in many communities. Similarly, child-headed households, which frequently arise in fragile contexts due to displacement or family separation, may lack the resources or social support systems necessary to secure consistent access to food. These dynamics suggest a bidirectional relationship between CP and FS, where vulnerabilities in one domain can exacerbate challenges in the other, creating a cyclical pattern of risk.

Expanding research to better understand this reverse relationship is essential for developing truly integrated CP-FS programming. Future efforts should focus on documenting how protection risks impact children's food security, identifying intervention points that address these interconnections, and designing programs that effectively break this cycle.

Limited evidence at national and subnational level

Moreover, while there is a growing body of evidence at the global level that demonstrates the linkages between food insecurity and child protection risks, there is a significant gap in context-specific research that examines how these dynamics manifest at the country or community level. Global data often provides a broad understanding of trends, such as how economic hardship increases the likelihood of negative coping mechanisms, but it lacks the granularity needed to inform programming in specific contexts. For example, the ways in which food insecurity drives child labour may differ significantly between a conflict-affected rural area and an urban slum. Similarly, the cultural, social, and economic factors that shape these linkages can vary widely, influencing both the nature of the risks and the effectiveness of potential interventions.

This lack of localized evidence limits the ability of practitioners to design programs that are tailored to the unique needs and vulnerabilities of children in specific settings. It also creates challenges for advocacy, as decision-makers often require context-specific data to prioritize funding and support for integrated CP-FS initiatives. To address this, there is an urgent need for country- and community-level studies that explore the interplay between food insecurity and child protection risks in diverse contexts. Such research should aim to reveal localized drivers of vulnerability, identify protective factors, and assess the effectiveness of integrated interventions.

Limited portfolio of integrated CP-FS implementation

The lack of documented programming examples in CP-FS integration mentioned above highlights a critical gap in both practice and learning. While, as said, there is increasing recognition of the interconnectedness of CP and FS, there remains a limited portfolio of programs that intentionally and effectively integrate the two sectors. This gap not only reflects a shortage of implementation but also a lack of systematic documentation and dissemination of lessons learned from existing efforts. Without robust examples, practitioners and policymakers lack the practical guidance needed to design and implement integrated CP-FS interventions tailored to diverse contexts.

As discussed earlier, global evidence emphasizes how food insecurity drives child protection risks, but less is known about how integrated programming can address these challenges effectively. Even less documentation exists on how child protection risks impact food security, as highlighted in the previous sections. The absence of country- and context-specific studies further complexes the challenge, leaving a critical void in the understanding of what works, for whom, and under what conditions.

Moreover, the existing examples often fail to capture the operational complexities and practical lessons that could guide future programming. For instance, integrated approaches require harmonized targeting strategies, shared problem definitions, and a strong Theory of Change—elements that are often underdeveloped in standalone sectoral programs. The CP-FS Toolbox, with its templates, guidance, and frameworks, is a significant step toward addressing this gap, but its utility depends on implementation testing, adaptation, and feedback to refine its application.

Going forward, it is essential to prioritize the implementation and documentation of integrated CP-FS programs in diverse settings. Capturing operational challenges, successes, and the interplay between child protection and food security interventions will not only enrich the evidence base but also provide a roadmap for scaling effective models.

Need for further advocacy to achieve strategic and political buy-in

Advocacy and political buy-in are essential to advancing integrated CP-FS programming, yet they remain underdeveloped in many contexts. Key decision-makers and actors often lack awareness of the profound interconnections between CP and FS, which results in fragmented responses and missed opportunities to address shared challenges holistically. Advocacy efforts are needed to sensitize policymakers, donors, and practitioners to the benefits of integrated programming—not just as a conceptual approach, but as a practical, evidence-based strategy to enhance outcomes for children and families.

Integrated CP-FS programming requires cross-sector collaboration, which is challenging to achieve without strong political support. Advocacy must focus on building a shared understanding of how food insecurity exacerbates CP risks, such as child labour or child marriage, and how CP vulnerabilities can, in turn, undermine household food security and affect the individual nutrition and food security status, considering intra household dynamics. Highlighting these interconnections can encourage decision-makers to prioritize funding and policy support for integrated approaches, ensuring that both sectors are resourced and aligned to address the complex needs of affected populations.

Political buy-in also involves advocating for changes in policy frameworks and operational guidelines to institutionalize integration. This includes revising sectoral strategies to incorporate CP-FS linkages, promoting joint planning and assessment mechanisms, and ensuring that funding streams incentivize collaboration rather than competition

between sectors. Advocacy should emphasize the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of integrated programming, demonstrating how it can mobilize resources more efficiently and effectively.

Finally, advocacy must extend to the community level, where local leaders and stakeholders play a critical role in supporting integrated interventions. Engaging them in discussions about the value of CP-FS programming can help build grassroots support and ensure the sustainability of integrated approaches.

Way forward

The toolbox includes case study templates designed to help practitioners document and share their experiences with integrated CP-FS programming. By encouraging systematic documentation during the testing phase, the toolbox seeks to build a robust portfolio of lessons learned that can guide future programming and advocacy efforts. These documented experiences will serve as a foundation for analysing what works, under what conditions, and for whom, thereby contributing to a growing evidence base for integrated approaches. However, more work is needed to ensure that these learnings are not only collected but also systematically compiled, analysed, and disseminated to inform practice and policy.

Additionally, piloting new approaches remains essential to exploring innovative ways of addressing the complex linkages between CP and FS. These pilots should focus on testing the toolbox's tools in diverse contexts and refining them based on real-world feedback. At the same time, efforts must be made to engage decision-makers and build political buy-in for integrated programming.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development of the CP-FS Toolbox represents a critical step toward bridging the gap between child protection and food security programming, addressing their interconnected risks, and fostering a more holistic approach to humanitarian and development interventions. While significant progress has been made, this process has also accentuated the need for continued collaboration, learning, and adaptation. Challenges such as the lack of integrated program models, limited cross-sector collaboration, and gaps in evidence highlight the complexity of integrating CP and FS efforts. However, they also present an opportunity to innovate, pilot new approaches, and systematically document lessons learned.

The toolbox serves not only as a resource for practitioners but also as a catalyst for building a stronger foundation of evidence and advocacy for integrated programming. Moving forward, engaging stakeholders at all levels, fostering political buy-in, and investing in capacity-building and context-specific solutions will be critical. The goal remains clear: to ensure that children and families affected by crises are protected, food secure, and supported in ways that are sustainable and transformative.

Mapping of existing frameworks, policies and strategies on CP and FS

Aim: strengthen/improve collaboration between CP-FS

Tools	Level/Scope	CP-FS description	Gaps/challenges	Opportunities
CPMS	Global	Defines CP-FS integration in limited contexts.	Limited operational guidance.	Align with the CP-FS toolbox to create practical tools that outline implementation pathways for integration.
DG ECHO's Humanitarian Food Assistance policy	Organizational	Outlines the European Union's approach to addressing food crises.	Very marginal reference to protection, no mention of CP specifically.	Advocate for inclusion of section on addressing interlinkage between CP and FS.
Global Strategic Framework for Food Security and Nutrition (GSF)	Global	High-level framework for FS strategies	No explicit CP integration	Use as an advocacy platform to integrate CP components in FS strategies, focusing on shared vulnerabilities.
INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children	Global	Set of technical evidence-based strategies aimed at reducing violence against children.	No explicit reference to FS	Promote the addition of FS considerations, especially in contexts of food insecurity impacting violence risks.
Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC)	Selected countries, potential for global	Standardized scale for classifying the severity of food insecurity and malnutrition	No reference to CP	Classification results can be shared with CP actors to enhance risk assessments and response coordination. Advocate for individual assessment of food security.
Inter-Agency Guidelines on Unaccompanied and Separated Children	Global	Comprehensive strategies for preventing family separation and responding to cases of unaccompanied and separated children	No focus on FS.	Incorporate FS considerations, particularly in emergency response scenarios involving separated children.
Sphere Standards	Global	Addresses CP and FS in silos.	Lacks practical guidance for integration.	Develop integrated guidance sections for future Sphere revisions to emphasize CP-FS interlinkages.
UNHCR Policy on Child Protection	Global	Commitments to protect forcibly displaced and stateless children.	No specific focus on FS services	Include explicit FS-related provisions in policies targeting displaced populations.
UNICEF Child Protection Strategy	Organizational	Comprehensive CP strategy but lacks FS considerations.	Minimal reference to food security.	Leverage UNICEF's global reach to pilot integrated CP-FS programming and mainstream FS linkages in future updates.
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	Global	Legally binding international agreement that outlines the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children	Does not directly relate to FS.	Advocate for FS actors to integrate CRC principles into programming to uphold children's food and protection rights.
United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	Global	Comprehensive framework for global development	No specific goal related to child protection	Align CP and FS interventions with SDG targets to enhance cross-sector collaboration and shared outcome measurement.
WFP Mainstreaming Guide	Organizational	Focuses on FS with minimal CP integration.	Limited child-specific protection actions included.	Update guidance to include robust CP components, drawing on CP-FS toolbox resources for mainstreaming actions.



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