

COMMON DONOR GREENING PRIORITY ACTIONS



PRIORITY ACTION 10 Support access to sustainably produced food, preferably locally produced.

February 2026

Crises often exacerbate food insecurity and hunger, while disrupting crop production, markets, and food supply chains. In response, the humanitarian sector delivers substantial assistance through direct food provision, as well as food security, agriculture, and emergency livelihoods programmes. These food- and agriculture-related interventions account for roughly half of the sector's total carbon emissions.¹ Moreover, global food production practices contribute significantly to environmental degradation, including soil depletion and pollution, deforestation, and the overexploitation of water resources.²

The primary priority for humanitarian actors must always be to deliver safe, nutritious, good-quality, and culturally appropriate food, in the right quantity and at the right time and place, to people in need. However, humanitarian actors should also take steps to reduce the climate and environmental impacts of their food assistance. By prioritising low-carbon food products that are produced in environmentally sustainable ways where possible, purchasing certified organic food items produced without pesticides, and working with international and local farmers and producers to improve agricultural practices, humanitarian organisations can help to make food assistance greener. In doing so, they can also contribute to transformative change across the wider food system, promoting national food systems and small-scale, locally driven food technologies³ that address local food insecurity, generate decent and fair employment, and contribute to local economies.



KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Identify where to prioritise efforts to reduce the climate and environmental impact of food assistance. This could involve, for example, targeting products that are distributed in the highest volumes or those with the most significant climate and environmental impacts in terms of carbon emissions, water use, soil degradation, or other. Incremental approaches are often the most feasible, as they allow for gradual change while minimising disruption and enabling learning over time.
- ✓ Where feasible, replace food items with less carbon-intensive and more environmentally sustainable alternatives, considering also agro-ecological conditions and geographic contexts:

¹ "Roadmap for Halving GHG Emissions in the Humanitarian Sector by 2030", Climate Action Accelerator, June 2024, pg. 18

<https://climateactionaccelerator.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Sectoral-analysis-1.pdf>

² For example, conventional rice farming significantly contributes to climate change: rice cultivation is a key factor in the loss of habitats and biodiversity within wetland forests and consumes nearly a third of the world's freshwater resources. Sustainable Rice Platform <https://sustainableice.org/>

³ Including technological or process innovations that are developed, managed, or adapted locally to improve how food is produced, processed, stored, or distributed (e.g. small-scale food processing innovations such as solar dryers for fruits or grains, or community-based food processing enterprises)

- Alternatives should be assessed on a case-by-case basis, as what is sustainable in one country or context may not be sustainable in another, given the significant variation in production methods and their impacts.
- Broader environmental and social considerations related to production should also be considered, including soil protection, biodiversity, water use, nutrition, livelihoods, and decent working conditions.
- Alternatives must be culturally appropriate to ensure acceptance by communities, to respect their dignity and to avoid food waste. Engage communities to assess whether the alternatives are suitable.
- Examples tried and tested by humanitarian organisations include replacing cane sugar with beet sugar; replacing tuna with sardines; replacing rice with sorghum or millet; using soybeans or chickpeas to produce plant-based alternatives to milk and shifting away from palm oil towards alternatives including sunflower oil.
- ✓ Prioritise producers and suppliers offering sustainable options through certification programmes, such as palm oil certified by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)⁴ or rice certified by the Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP)⁵ or products free of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO)⁶.
- ✓ Gain a better understanding of the food and agricultural stakeholders in your supply chain, and their room for manoeuvre to reduce the climate and environmental impact of their products. For the rice sector, for example, working directly with rice *producers* to help them adopt more environmentally sustainable practices can have a real impact. By contrast, rice *millers*, *transporters*, and *traders* may have limited capacity to influence production methods.
- ✓ Create synergies with development actors and with sustainable agriculture programmes (e.g. those that promote agroecology, nature-based solutions, permaculture, and hydroponics) and food assistance programmes (e.g. those that strengthen food security, self-reliance and self-sufficiency) to address food insecurity on a long-term basis.
- ✓ Source seasonal and locally produced food items when these are produced sustainably. These might also be the preferred source of food for the local population in cultural terms.



KEY RESOURCES

Guidance on the operationalisation of the minimum environmental requirements and recommendations for EU-funded humanitarian aid operations

- **Organisation responsible:** DG ECHO
- **Short description:** the guidance refers to clean cooking energy and technologies in the section on Food Assistance (pages 41-45).
- **Accessibility:** English.

Livelihoods & Food Security Activity Module - Nexus Environmental Assessment Tool (NEAT+).

- **Organisation responsible:** developed by the UNEP/OCHA Joint Environment Unit, USAID, UNHCR, NRC, IUCN, WWF with support from DG ECHO

⁴ Round table on Sustainable Palm Oil <https://rspo.org/>

⁵ Sustainable Rice Platform <https://sustainablerice.org/>

⁶ Although the long-term impacts of GMOs in terms of environmental and human health are not clear, GMOs are often associated with intensive agriculture and the use of pesticides. See "[Scoping Review on the Environmental Footprint of Humanitarian Assistance](#)", DG ECHO

- **Short description:** NEAT+ is a rapid and simple project-level environmental assessment tool (see *Guidance on Priority Activity 1*). The Livelihoods & Food Security Module helps organisations identify possible environmental risks associated with their planned livelihoods/ food security activities, so that mitigation measures can be built into project design. It is broken down into 3 sub-modules (direct food assistance, livestock, agriculture and irrigation).
- **Accessibility:** [English here](#) ; [French here](#) ; [Spanish here](#)

Sustainable Rice Platform Standard for Sustainable Rice Cultivation, 2023

- **Organisation responsible:** Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP)
- **Short description:** Guidance which outlines the requirements necessary to achieve the SRP's Standard for Sustainable Rice Cultivation. It provides details of good practices in terms of water, planting, nutrient management and pest control.
- **Accessibility:** English

What is Agroecology?

- **Organisation responsible:** Action Against Hunger
- **Short description:** Article illustrating ways in which humanitarian organisations can include agroecological practices in their programmes to fight against malnutrition and hunger.
- **Accessibility:** English

Examples trialled by the French NGO ACTED

- Meat and dairy in food kits contribute significantly to emissions, mostly due to animal feed. In the Middle East/North Africa region, feed is often imported or bought from shops. ACTED started to promote micro funds for alternative feed like Azolla, a fast-growing aquatic fern, as chicken feed - offering lower water use and reduced carbon emissions.
- ACTED also trialled the use of hydroponic barley as sheep feed to reduce reliance on open grazing on degraded rangelands. This prevents further land degradation and emissions, while offering feed security during lean seasons when farmers might otherwise kill livestock or rely on imported feed.
- Accessibility: click [here](#) to find out more about how ACTED is helping to provide sustainable work opportunities in the agricultural sector (in French [here](#)).



PITFALLS TO AVOID

- Do not expect to find greener alternatives for all types of food assistance. Alternatives may not yet be available for all products and/or sometimes only apply to high-quality varieties (e.g. basmati rice) which are not traditionally used in humanitarian assistance programmes.
- Do not assume that more sustainable food products will necessarily be more expensive or allow concerns about increased costs to act as a barrier. While more sustainable options may in some cases carry a higher price (for example, certified palm oil can cost approximately €50–80 more per tonne), in other cases they may be less expensive (such as using soy or chickpeas as alternatives to dairy).
- Do not focus exclusively on transport when seeking to reduce the emissions of food assistance, as this can be misleading. The majority of a food product's carbon footprint is generated during production and manufacturing processes, while transport typically accounts for only a small fraction of the total.⁷

⁷See for example CHORD's [Data-driven study of the environmental performance of CSB++](#) (2022) which shows that transportation does not contribute significantly (relative to other life cycle steps to the environmental footprint of CSB++ or ["You want to reduce the carbon footprint of your food? Focus on what you eat, not whether your food is local!"](#) (Hannah Ritchie, 2022) in *Our World in Data*.



GOOD PRACTICES

- **Work collectively:** Individually, humanitarian organisations often have relatively low purchasing power and therefore limited influence over production practices. This underscores the need to align approaches and engage in joint dialogue and collective action when working with suppliers and producers. It is important to build on existing initiatives that bring together producers, labels, and certification bodies.
- Strengthen planning and consultation to ensure food assistance is culturally acceptable and put in place suitable storage and transport arrangements to prevent food waste resulting from rejection by communities or damage caused by rodents, pests, flooding, or other factors.
- Reducing the environmental and climate footprint of the food assistance provided by humanitarian organisations should include a reflection on preventing food waste. Strengthen the impact of measures by promoting sustainable cooking techniques which reduce the amount of firewood required to cook the food distributed (*see Guidance on Priority Action 9*).
- For organisations with sufficient capacity, undertaking an analysis of which items have the greatest environmental and carbon impacts can help identify priority areas for action. Such assessments can clarify where the most significant environmental impacts of food assistance occur and where efforts can be most effectively focused.

The INSPIRE+ Consortium is made up of IECAH, ODI, FAIREPROD and Groupe URD. It provides the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) with support in developing its policies via research, training, workshops and the dissemination of findings.