

CONSUMERS IN CRISIS:

AN ACTION AGENDA FOR FUTURE FOOD SYSTEMS



**CONSUMERS
INTERNATIONAL**

COMING TOGETHER
FOR CHANGE

A CONSUMER LENS ON THE GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS

The impact of the food crisis has been immediate, widespread, and devastating – through a Consumers International cost-of-living survey, 66% of consumer groups reported that more than half of the population had been ‘seriously affected’ by rising food prices, for instance skipping meals or relying on government support.

Food insecurity also undermines food safety, health, and sustainability – participants in Consumers International dialogues in Kenya, Indonesia, and Ecuador warned that reduced purchasing power undermines consumer choice, highlighting that “if what we are getting cannot sustain us, we will eat whatever we can get”.

This crisis has exposed the fragility of our overconcentrated food systems – consumer advocates in Indonesia identified how dependence on imports had undermined local production and weakened capacity to respond to the crisis, while those in Ecuador highlighted the value of shorter, more flexible supply chains.

Only sustainable food systems can protect consumers – asked about priority actions for alleviating the food crisis, 78% of consumer groups backed ‘supporting more diverse and sustainable agricultural production’, while dialogue participants in Kenya emphasised the key role of climate crisis in driving food insecurity.

Action is needed now to deliver food systems transformation – 83% of consumer groups highlighted the need to urgently increase protections for consumers, while only 19% reported any level of satisfaction in their government’s response.

AN ACTION AGENDA FOR FUTURE FOOD SYSTEMS

Through this lens of consumer rights and needs, it is clear that governments must act now to build food systems that are fair and sustainable, built on resilience and diversity.

The challenge is achieving this without compromising the needs of those suffering today. For over 60 years, Consumers International has represented the global voice of consumers to international decision-makers. Together with our 200 consumer advocacy members from across the world, we have put together an action agenda for future food systems that offers a vision for the road ahead:

- 1. Protect consumers in crisis, now and in future** – through emergency support for the vulnerable; action against excessive prices; and international co-operation to guarantee access for all.
- 2. Build supply chains rooted in food sovereignty, agroecology and regenerative food production** – by connecting producers and consumers in local food systems; investing in shared infrastructure; and shifting subsidies to prioritise people and planet.
- 3. Transform food environments to make good food accessible for all** – through stronger standards on safety, nutrition, and sustainability; making good food more affordable; and transforming the information ecosystem.
- 4. Develop inclusive and ambitious food governance frameworks** – by engaging a diversity of voices; establishing cross-cutting governance; and implementing decision-making frameworks that centre social and environmental well-being.

All around the world, soaring prices and supply chain disruptions are putting consumers at risk, and undermining their access to basic necessities. The COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine have exposed the fundamental fragility of our global food systems, which have long been failing to meet the needs of people and planet, and are therefore in urgent need of transformation.

At the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit, Consumers International – along with 200 member organisations in over 100 countries – [called for inclusive and cross-cutting action](#) to transform food systems. Since the summit, Consumers International has been working with consumer advocates around the world to understand how this crisis is impacting people, and how emergency responses can – and must – be aligned with food systems transformation.

In partnership with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), we convened national dialogues in Kenya, Indonesia, and Ecuador – three countries where the aligned challenges of hunger, health, and climate are causing serious harm to consumers. Each dialogue brought together approximately 50 food systems stakeholders, including officials from across national and local governments, to identify critical actions needed to protect vulnerable consumers and promote sustainable food systems.



The learnings from these dialogues, together with insights from across our global membership, form the basis of this action agenda for future food systems.

A CONSUMER LENS ON FOOD CRISIS

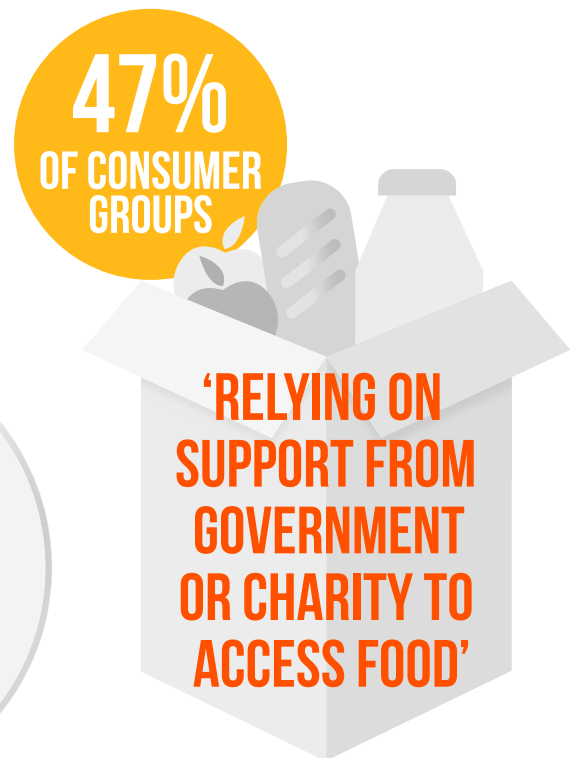
The impact of global food crisis has been immediate, widespread, and devastating:

Across the world, the issue of food crisis has rocketed to the top of the agenda – for governments, for consumer groups, and for the people they represent. Food has always been a top priority for consumer advocacy – as of 2020, over 70% of Consumers International members worked actively on food systems. However, many are now taking a new or increased focus; some are addressing the issue of food security for the first time, having previously focused on safety, nutrition, or sustainability. In a recent cost-of-living survey of Consumers International member groups, 91% of respondents noted that they are currently monitoring food prices.



Every single respondent highlighted that food prices have risen in their country since the start of the crisis, in many cases in excess of **50%** or even **100%** – and often beyond the level indicated by government data on prices.

The impact on consumers has been similarly widespread; **66%** of respondents reported that more than half of the population had been **'seriously affected'**.



Our national dialogues in Kenya, Ecuador, and Indonesia added further cause for concern, with consumer advocates emphasising how the cross-cutting nature of this crisis conceals the full extent of the challenge facing people in the marketplace. Rising food prices are made significantly more harmful by the context of rising energy prices and lost livelihoods, with knock-on effects identified in access to healthcare, education, housing, and other basic needs. Participants also noted the uneven spread of vulnerability to food insecurity – particularly for low-income consumers who rely on the cheapest products, which are increasing in price far more rapidly than the average basket of goods.

Food insecurity also undermines food safety, health, and sustainability:

Reduced access to food can serve as a threat multiplier, intensifying many existing food systems challenges. This is felt first and foremost by consumers themselves; a consumer advocate in Kenya noted that ‘if what we are getting cannot sustain us, we will eat whatever we can get’. As purchasing power declines, consumers are forced to turn to less safe, healthy, and environmentally-conscious options. Rising prices are therefore a major barrier not just to food security, but also to accessing more nutritious and sustainable diets.

However, this cross-cutting impact goes beyond consumer choices; authorities are also considering compromising on standards, with consumer advocates reporting that many governments are pursuing deregulation in an effort to increase supply. An ill-considered response to the food crisis might weaken protections against other threats to human and planetary health, such as the regulation of antibiotics and chemical inputs, or incentives that promote more agroecological food production practices. Consumer voices remind us that the right to food necessarily entails a right to safe, healthy, and sustainable food.

This crisis has exposed the fragility of our overconcentrated food systems:

Building resilient food systems requires looking beyond the immediate causes of the crisis, and recognising the systemic vulnerabilities that make supply shocks (such as conflict and COVID-19) so devastating. One key factor identified across a wide range of contexts was a dependence on long, complex, and inflexible food supply chains, leaving consumers vulnerable to the volatility of international trade. In Indonesia, stakeholders emphasised how import dependence had undermined local food systems, with monoculture for export prioritised instead. In Ecuador, the discussion focused on the successes of shorter supply chains, built on principles of food sovereignty, in delivering benefit to people and planet.

Many of the structural problems facing food systems appear to stem from a lack of diversification; from insufficient biodiversity in food production, to overconcentrated marketplaces that threaten to marginalise consumers and producers alike. Many consumer groups have suggested that price rises, for instance, are far exceeding what can be attributed to supply and demand alone, and are in fact also being driven by profiteering, enabled by a lack of competition. Dialogue participants in Kenya noted that this problem dates back far beyond the current crisis, and called for enhanced action from competition authorities to deliver a fair food marketplace – a call that has been echoed across a range of contexts.

Only sustainable food systems can protect consumers:

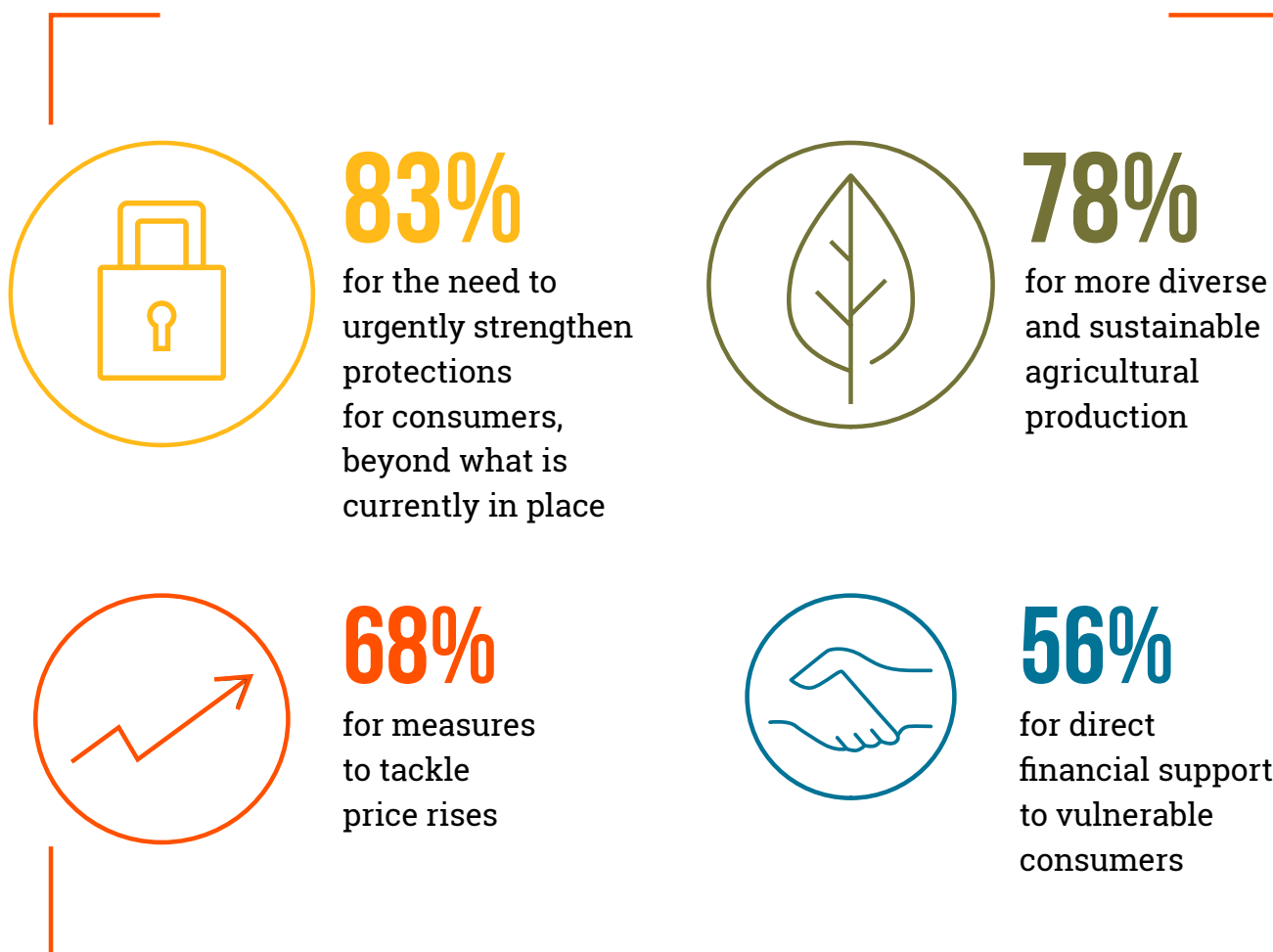
Environmental breakdown is another important factor behind the severity of this food crisis. In Kenya, for example, drought remains the most significant driver of hunger and rising prices, with some farmers losing up to 70% of their crops this year. In turn, food systems failures have played a key role in escalating climate crisis – being responsible for around one-third of global emissions, and a major driver of biodiversity loss. This results in a dangerous feedback loop, whereby food systems contribute to the climate crisis; climate crisis drives the food crisis; and food crisis distracts from the need to build more sustainable food systems.

For consumer advocates, efforts to tackle hunger are not distinguishable from this need to deliver sustainable food systems, built on agroecological production and fair supply chains. Asked about actions needed in response to the food crisis, 78% of consumer group respondents highlighted the need for more diverse and sustainable agricultural production. The challenges of hunger and climate

are intersecting, but so are the solutions – national dialogues highlighted the crucial role of affordability in unlocking more sustainable diets, and discussed how tackling food loss and waste could reduce greenhouse gas emissions and food prices simultaneously.

Action is needed now to deliver food systems transformation:

There is a clear perception among consumer advocates that not enough is being done in response to the food crisis – and that many of the actions which are being taken, may be misdirected. 83% of survey respondents highlighted the need to urgently strengthen protections for consumers, and just 19% reported any level of satisfaction with their government’s response to the challenge of rising prices (compared to 48% who were dissatisfied). Reasons given for this dissatisfaction ranged from frustration – often citing a focus on increasing production at any cost, without considering the complex needs of people and planet – through to desperation, reporting that consumers’ struggles were being ignored entirely.



The national dialogues helped expand on this vision for action, emphasising the key role of food systems governance in both short-term crisis response and long-term transformation. Participants emphasised the need for more inclusive and accountable governance – engaging consumer voices and other key constituencies, especially producers. Another key message was that governance needs to be more cross-cutting, with many participants highlighting a disconnect between different branches of food policy action. Without co-ordination between crisis response and food systems transformation, delivering progress on either front will not be possible.

AN ACTION AGENDA FOR FUTURE FOOD SYSTEMS

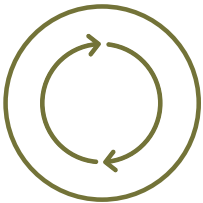
Our food systems are not fit for the future; the needs of people and planet are not being met. Pouring more and more resources into the broken status quo will not solve this current crisis, yet will cause even greater challenges for future generations. The solution is clear – to invest now in building truly fair and sustainable food systems, built on resilience and diversity.

Many of the critical actions needed have been clear for some time. At the UN Food Systems Summit in 2021, Consumers International and its members issued a call for action highlighting the need for ‘people-centred solutions’ – those which include and empower the communities and constituencies being failed by food systems. The key action areas identified – from food safety and security to fair and sustainable food environments and supply chains – remain crucial.

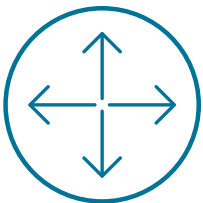
The challenge for governments is how to achieve this much-needed transformation, while simultaneously meeting consumers’ urgent needs in a context of crisis. This action agenda for future food systems – drawing on input from consumer groups worldwide, and from a wide range of key food systems actors – offers an overview of what is needed to deliver this transformation, with the needs of people and planet centred:



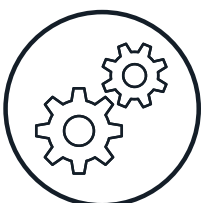
1. PROTECT CONSUMERS IN CRISIS, NOW AND IN FUTURE



2. BUILD SUPPLY CHAINS ROOTED IN FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, AGROECOLOGY AND REGENERATIVE FOOD PRODUCTION



3. TRANSFORM FOOD ENVIRONMENTS TO MAKE GOOD FOOD ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL



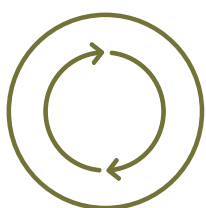
4. DEVELOP INCLUSIVE AND AMBITIOUS FOOD GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS



PROTECT CONSUMERS IN CRISIS, NOW AND IN FUTURE

First and foremost, urgent action is required to protect immediate consumer needs, including the right to food; building for the future cannot justify neglecting those who are suffering now. Key actions include:

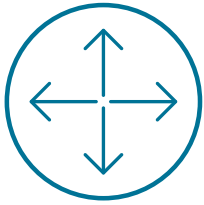
- Providing food and financial support directly to those in need – not just as an emergency measure, but for as long as is necessary, through sustainable social protection mechanisms that can be maintained for future crises.
- Taking action against excessive pricing, such as that caused by price gouging and speculation. As well as immediate penalties for those responsible, longer-term measures are needed to strengthen competition in the marketplace.
- Offering international support to governments that are struggling to support consumers; from debt cancellation, or other options for creating fiscal space, through to transforming trade rules in order to build a fairer global economy.



BUILD SUPPLY CHAINS ROOTED IN FOOD SOVEREIGNTY, AGROECOLOGY AND REGENERATIVE FOOD PRODUCTION

Resilient food systems cannot be delivered solely through changing production practices; food supply chains need to be transformed too. This will require radical new linkages, especially at the local level, that can shape the future food marketplace. Key actions include:

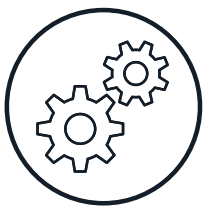
- Supporting connections between producers and consumers; both to enable collective advocacy for food systems transformation, and to establish local supply chains centred on fairness and sustainability.
- Investing in infrastructure – both physical and digital – that can enable new connections and supply chain models. Public, open-access infrastructure is especially crucial for a fair and diversified marketplace.
- Shifting subsidies to prioritise people and planet, rather than upholding broken systems. Supporting local food systems must be a top priority, as well as consumer-level subsidies to promote affordability.



TRANSFORM FOOD ENVIRONMENTS TO MAKE GOOD FOOD ACCESSIBLE FOR ALL

Food systems transformation will necessarily require major changes to what we eat, but responsibility for this transition cannot be left to consumers alone; action is needed to reshape the food environments that incentivise and enable consumer choice. Actions include:

- Ensuring the availability of safe, healthy, and sustainable foods, by implementing minimum standards on production and supply, and ensuring that publicly procured food meets more ambitious targets.
- Improving the affordability of good food by redirecting subsidies and investment (all throughout food systems) to prioritise these options, and by providing targeted support to vulnerable consumers.
- Supporting the accessibility of healthy and sustainable food by rethinking the consumer information ecosystem, for instance through clear and concise front-of-pack labelling, and the regulation of misleading or harmful marketing.



DEVELOP INCLUSIVE AND AMBITIOUS FOOD GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS

The scale of transformation needed requires a radical rethinking of food systems governance, to serve people and planet rather than profit. Actions include:

- Engaging a diversity of voices in food governance, especially those that most depend on food systems, such as producers and consumers. Truly inclusive governance must be accessible, democratic, and accountable.
- Establishing cross-cutting food systems governance mechanisms, such as new authorities or national strategies, that seek to align different priorities and areas of government, and that can address food systems in their entirety.
- Implementing decision-making frameworks that centre social and environmental well-being, to establish clear best practices that can guide policymakers, businesses, and consumers alike.

These inclusive, cross-cutting solutions need to be on the table at both international and national levels – from COP27 and COP28 through to the national transformation pathways emerging from the Food Systems Summit, and beyond. It will not be sufficient to address the intersecting challenges facing food systems in isolation; supporting consumers and other key constituencies through current and future crises means paying more attention to people's rights and needs.

If we act now, a future food system that meets the needs of people and planet is within reach; if we delay, these crises will continue to interact and multiply, causing further suffering for people everywhere.



Consumers International brings together over 200 member organisations in more than 100 countries to empower and champion the rights of consumers everywhere. We are their voice in international policy-making forums and the global marketplace to ensure they are treated safely, fairly and honestly.

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