



Ten years after the  
global food crisis,  
rural women still bear  
the brunt of poverty  
and hunger



**OXFAM**

Agricultural development once again became the focus of international attention following the spike in global cereal prices in 2007-2008. The slow, steady decline in the price of staple grains since the early 1960s had led both aid donors and developing-country governments to put agriculture on the back burner for decades.

However, widespread protests over higher prices, including violence in some cases, have put food and agriculture back at the top of the global policy agenda. This could have been an opportunity to address failings in the global agri-food system and the underlying structural causes of the crisis. Instead, donors and private sector actors unfortunately pursued commercially-oriented agricultural development that seeks to intensify and concentrate production, often of commodity crops for export, but also of cereals for local consumption. The policy responses were either one-shot, short-term initiatives or were focused on the wrong target – increased production and increased private sector investment – worsening rural poverty and leaving smallholder farmers and rural women to face continued hardship. Holders of differing perspectives on agricultural development contend over control of global governance structures, leading to a fragmentation of international responses. This political manoeuvring has hampered global action and shut out the voice of the most marginalized actors.

There were various structural factors that culminated in the crisis: the liberalization of agricultural trade; concentration of distribution and input supply marginalizing smaller actors; and declining public investments in agriculture and foreign aid to agriculture, all happening in a context of climate change and variability. Those long-term trends have made smallholder farmers and rural women even more vulnerable to shorter-term supply and demand factors that were evident in the run up to the food-price crisis. These were primarily the evolution of market fundamentals: notably a marked shift towards globalization and commercialization of food and agriculture. Also, rich countries’ policies supporting biofuels diverted crops away from use for food and livestock feed, putting additional upward pressure on prices. The figure on the next page offers a visualization of the structural and supply-demand factors

that resulted in the perfect storm of global food-price escalation.

10 years later, food-security scenarios do not appear any brighter. Because the paradigm has not changed as a result of the food-price crisis, policies and funds have not targeted the most marginalized groups, and poor rural women remain insecure on all dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilization, and stability.

Today, hunger is on the rise, as the UN’s 2018 report on the State of Food Security and Nutrition indicates: 821 million people experienced food insecurity in 2017,<sup>1</sup> about the same number as a decade earlier. The report says that ‘more complex, frequent, and intense climate extremes’ were among the leading causes of food crises in 2017. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),<sup>2</sup> there is already evidence of farmers migrating as temperatures increase, exacerbating inequality as those least able to cope face loss of livelihoods.

At least 70% of the world’s poor people live in rural areas,<sup>3</sup> and women on average make up almost half the agricultural labour force in developing countries.<sup>4</sup> Women farmers balance on the razor edge of extreme shocks to the system: a warming world, with increasing hunger and violent conflicts leading to record numbers of forcibly displaced people. This puts the SDG mandate to ‘leave no one behind’ in serious jeopardy.

Indeed, women are more likely to be food-insecure than men in every region of the world, especially in a context of increased reliance on markets. Poor female smallholders face discrimination and barriers to accessing resources, education, and services. But when women enjoy the same access to resources and services as men, this enhances agricultural productivity, to the benefit of society as a whole.



**AT LEAST 70% OF THE WORLD’S POOR PEOPLE LIVE IN RURAL AREAS**



**WOMEN ON AVERAGE MAKE UP ALMOST HALF THE AGRICULTURAL LABOUR FORCE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

**FIGURE 1: A GLOBAL STORM IN THE MAKING: EXISTING STRUCTURAL FACTORS AND EMERGING MARKET FACTORS LEADING TO THE FOOD PRICE CRISIS MARGINALIZED WOMEN SMALLHOLDER FARMERS<sup>5</sup>**

**UNDERLYING STRUCTURAL FACTORS OF THE FOOD PRICE CRISIS**



**Increased inequalities and exclusion**

**WOMEN SMALLHOLDER FARMERS**  
Rural women represent a quarter of the world's population and around 43% of the agricultural labour force in developing countries.<sup>6</sup> They play a critical role in the food system, in the production, processing, preparation, consumption and distribution of food. But they face strong disadvantages, specifically in land rights (small plots, difficulty to access ownership), productive resources (poor access to water, credit, extension services, and inputs), unpaid work, insecure employment, and low decision making power.

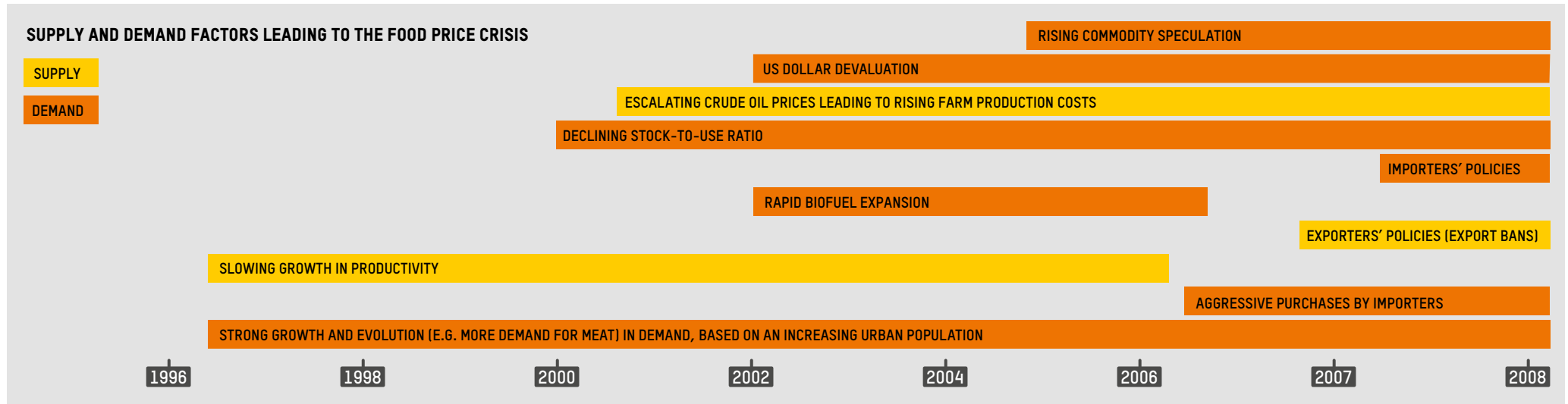
**Strong inequalities and discrimination at all levels**

**Wider society level:**  
Socially constructed barriers to access productive and financial resources that also hinder social participation and political representation

**Household level**  
Weaker bargaining position within the family and differential feeding and care giving practices favouring boys over girls lead to poorer nutritional outcomes for women and girls.

**HOW THE FOOD PRICE CRISIS MADE IT WORSE**

**Globally**, rural women have less access to financial and agricultural resources, and to extension services, limited legal benefits and protection, extensive time burdens, and limited decision-making power, thus they have fewer options than men for overcoming crisis and more risks of losing assets and formal sector jobs. **At the household level**, women tend to buffer the impact of the crisis using more extreme coping strategies: reducing their own consumption to leave more food for other household members, reducing the diversity of diets (with higher risks, especially for pregnant and lactating mothers, of micronutrient deficiencies that can negatively impact their health and nutritional status and those of their children), or even migrating in distress, selling assets, collecting wild food, or going into unsafe jobs to boost their incomes.



## SUPPLY AND DEMAND FACTORS WERE PARTIALLY ADDRESSED IN THE GLOBAL RESPONSE TO THE CRISIS

After 2007–2008, a flurry of actions took place: official development assistance (ODA), multilateral initiatives for reinvestments in agriculture, and inter-governmental action to put food security at the top of the political agenda. But discussion focused on the need to double production, both to dampen short-term price increases and also to meet projected population growth through 2050. Despite abundant global food supplies during the first years following the crisis, global policy responses and funding commitments focused on macro-level measures such as production support, food aid, and preventing export bans.

Between June 2008 and July 2009, the World Food Programme (WFP) provided short-term food aid valued at USD 5.1bn, nearly twice the level of agricultural aid mobilized by the World Bank, FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) (USD 2.78bn).<sup>7</sup> However, food aid volumes in 2007–2012 were below those of 2001–2006, precisely because of higher commodity prices.

Several governments adopted measures to improve their populations' immediate access to foodstuffs: subsidized staple prices, lower tariffs on imported food, and restrictions on staple exports. In 2008, the majority of West African governments lowered tariffs and taxes on some cereals, and some imposed food price controls. Although such measures can ease the food-price burden on consumers, they cannot ensure efficiency and sustainability or target all vulnerable people, and may be very costly to maintain.

In the wake of the price spikes, the G20 encouraged the development of the Agricultural Marketing Information System (AMIS). This is a practical step by governments towards transparency in commodity markets, and facilitates peer-to-peer learning among the largest producer and consuming countries. However, AMIS cannot control many of the factors that cause price volatility, nor can it monitor private stocks (such as those held by grain traders). And it cannot tackle all the major market failures that lay behind the crisis. Global policy makers largely failed to enact needed reforms to financial markets to prevent destabilizing commodity-market speculation, due to pressure from industry lobbyists to maintain the status quo.

## STRUCTURAL FACTORS WERE IGNORED OR EXACERBATED

### Liberalization of agricultural trade

While many countries adopted export bans and domestic-market protection as immediate responses to rising prices, in the medium-term, several countries turned to export promotion: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Paraguay in South America, Syria and Yemen in the Middle East, and China, Pakistan, and (partially) India in Asia. The policy emphasis on greater food production has encouraged an expansion in industrial agriculture and the consolidation of land holdings, including land grabs (large-scale land acquisitions that often dispossess smallholders), and ignored environmental constraints and equity issues. More than 60% of crops (mainly

sugarcane, palm oil, and soy) grown on land bought by foreign investors in developing countries are intended for export, instead of for feeding local communities. Two-thirds of these agricultural land deals are in countries that have been largely affected by the food price crisis.<sup>8</sup>

### No major increase in foreign aid to agriculture

Despite the flurry of financial pledges and commitments post crisis, OECD data show that ODA for food security and nutrition (FSN) has only kept pace with the overall rise in total ODA. Moreover, the 2009 L'Aquila pledge led by the European Commission, United States, Japan, and Germany, totalled USD 22bn over three years, but just USD 6.1bn of this was new money, rather than reprogrammed funds.<sup>9</sup> Also, the promises represented one-time commitments, not long-term aid increases.

Over the past decade, donors and international bodies have increasingly looked to inject private sector resources and expertise into development by using ODA – public finance – to 'leverage' private finance through 'blending' the two together. This potentially threatens aid and development effectiveness, as it too often lacks transparency and accountability, and fails to support country ownership of development. So far, there is little evidence to demonstrate that blended finance contributes to poverty reduction for the most marginalized groups or to environmental sustainability.

### Box 1: EU funding<sup>10</sup>

In its policies, the EU has adopted a rights-based approach and is committed to finding long-term solutions to tackle food insecurity, including empowering smallholders, in particular women, and supporting environmentally sustainable approaches in agriculture. However, Oxfam analysis of pre-implementation project data showed that the EU's development aid to the agricultural sector does not live up to its commitments:

- Only 2–3% of EU funding promoted gender equality in agriculture, while ecological sustainability was largely missed out in project planning documents altogether.
- EU aid consistently furnished industrial and export crops with significantly bigger budgets than food crops (with the exception of just one year, 2009).
- The aid was also used to support EU foreign policy goals, with 3.6 times as much agricultural development aid spent per capita in Europe as in Sub-Saharan Africa.

### National public investments in agriculture continue to fall short

Several governments announced a revival of policies favouring agriculture. Many countries provided support to consumers and producers in 2007–2008 and continuing through 2010. These measures included supporting large-scale farmers' access to improved seeds and fertilizers at subsidized prices and providing better access to credit. Nevertheless, current public investment levels in agriculture are woefully inadequate: the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates a 2015–2030 investment gap in developing-country agriculture of USD 260bn annually.<sup>110</sup>

Although the member states of the African Union have set a target of allocating 10% of their budgets to agriculture, the continental average remains at about half that level.

### Concentration of distribution and inputs

More space has been given to the private sector since the crisis: the G8 launched its New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition in Africa in May 2012, with a goal of ‘unleashing the potential of the private sector.’ States have encouraged this general push for large-scale private investment in agriculture, along with international organizations, development agencies, and multinational agri-food businesses. It has come at the expense of family farms and farmers. Today, three conglomerates enjoy a 60% share of global turnover for commercial seed and agricultural chemicals,<sup>12</sup> 1% of the world’s farms control 65% of the agricultural land,<sup>13</sup> and four companies account for 70% of trade in agricultural commodities globally by revenue.<sup>14</sup>

#### BOX 2: A more hybrid and fragmented governance

After the 2008 crisis, a new pattern of fluid, non-hierarchical inter-organizational networks emerged to coordinate food security, suffering from fragmentation and lacking clear leadership. The global governance was split between the G8-G20, providers of development aid (WFP, World Bank, IFAD, USAID, the EU, and private foundations), agrarian and economic policy forums (FAO and its Committee on World Food Security, or CFS; the International Food Policy Research Institute; UNCTAD) and UN enforcement bodies (WTO). The most powerful actors are the richer countries and main aid donors that come together in summits such as the G8/7 and G20, give general political direction, and can take big decisions at moments of crisis. The influence of philanthropic foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, has also increased, and public-private partnerships (PPPs) have proliferated. All of this bypassed the role of the CFS, the only inclusive platform giving open space for civil society to be a part of the decision process, while holding FAO Member States accountable. The complexity of global food security governance permits states scope to pursue contradictory policy goals: providing development aid to agriculture while pursuing aggressive agricultural trade liberalization and limiting the influence of the CFS and its multi-stakeholder process.

### Climate change

Adaptation to climate change is also an issue that needs high-level funding to reach zero hunger. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) found developing countries could face costs of USD 140–300bn per year by 2030,<sup>15</sup> a significant portion of which relates to agriculture. According to Oxfam research, adaptation finance is currently at just a fraction of the target amount, with the allocation for adaptation remaining at less than half of total climate finance. Only 3.6% of adaptation funding is earmarked for smallholders: the figure was USD 345m in 2016. Notably, some USD 300m of multilateral

adaptation funding has been pledged to one specific fund: IFAD’s Adaptation for Smallholders in Agriculture Program.<sup>16</sup>

## INCREASED CHALLENGES ON ALL DIMENSIONS OF FOOD SECURITY

The failure to attain the right to adequate food for all – and specifically women smallholder farmers – and thus reach SDG2 by 2030 has been caused by instability in the factors that contribute to achieving food security, and this has resulted in food-price volatility. All this is largely the consequence of gender-blind political choices that have failed to tackle the broken structure of the agri-food system.

### Availability

Women experience decreased resilience to shocks as a result of increased climate variability and extremes that threaten agricultural yields. In many rural economies they usually have limited access – compared to men – to the social, environmental, and financial resources (land, water, education, credit, health, information, mobility) and are often excluded from decision-making processes and labour markets. This means that women are less able to cope with and adapt to climate change impacts and are at higher risk of suffering from low yields in the face of climate change. This seriously undermines their ability to produce food for their families’ own consumption, or to earn an income from it.

### Access

Women have less access to or control over resources, transportation, or communication networks than men. Their access to independent property rights, legal protections, and social networks are contested in many areas. As a consequence, female-headed households are disproportionately among the poorest of the poor in rural areas and have less access to food. Within concentrated global and domestic value chains, women farmers are at risk because of their weak bargaining position: global food industries and supermarket chains play an increasingly prominent role in food supply, and access to food depends on income, price levels, and social transfers, factors over which women have no power or on which they face discrimination. Deeply entrenched gender norms mean the impact is most severe for women: they are concentrated in the lowest paid, least secure roles across the agri-food sector, with inadequate social protection measures. Women smallholder farmers are driven out of markets, being squeezed by corporate entities, input providers, and buyers.

Within farming households, there are gender differences in revenue-earning from crops, especially for high-value cash crops. Most smallholders engaged in the cultivation of these crops are male, and women usually produce traditional staple and non-staple crops that are important sources of critical micronutrients but that have been neglected by post-crisis policies primarily targeting cereal production to reach national sufficiency.

### Utilization

Within the household, women are often the ones eating least, last, and least well. Increased poverty in female-headed households has direct impacts on women’s nutrition: to adjust

to the decline in their capacity to purchase or grow high quality, diverse foods they often shift to less costly and less diverse diets, which are often deficient in the essential nutrients that are particularly important for pregnant women and young children. Diets are changing as people rely increasingly on purchased processed foods in place of traditional diets richer in fibre, minerals, and vitamins.

As FAO notes, 'More often than not, the face of malnutrition is female.'<sup>17</sup> One in every three women of reproductive age worldwide suffers from anaemia, usually due to iron-deficient diets. Worldwide, anaemia is a contributing or sole cause of 20-40% of maternal deaths. Because anaemia caused by iron deficiency results in reduced learning capacity and less productive workers, it is estimated to reduce gross domestic product by 4% annually, particularly in African and South-east Asian countries.<sup>18</sup>

### INADEQUATE FUNDING AND TARGETING

Some donors and major UN institutions did shift their narratives to factor gender into their policies and strategies. However, there is scant evidence that policy responses after the food-price crisis systematically accounted for gender differentials (nutritional impact, coping strategies such as withdrawing girls from school, and worsening of poverty among female-headed households) and research in the area is still limited. This data gap is a major issue for gender analysis and the monitoring of implementation of the right to food. There is still no disaggregated data available to assess women's access to land and other resources, time use and decision-making capacity (apart from some work from FAO and IFPRI). FAO developed an extensive set of indicators covering multiple determinants of food security and outcomes but only 1 of the 40 indicators is related to gender: anaemia among pregnant women.<sup>19</sup>

OECD data<sup>20</sup> show that overall bilateral aid targeting gender equality and women's empowerment as either a significant (secondary) or principal (primary) objective in all sectors combined was higher than ever before in 2015-2016, corresponding to 37% of total aid. However, the aid activities that had gender equality and women's empowerment as their principal objective remained consistently below USD 5bn per year, representing only 4% of DAC members' total bilateral allocable aid in 2015-2016. Dedicated support focussed on gender equality and women's empowerment as the primary objective in the economic and productive sectors – which encompasses agriculture and rural development – decreased from USD 616 million on average per year in 2013-2014 to only USD 460 million on average per year in 2015-2016, representing just 1% of total aid to the economic and productive sectors. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that out of the USD 460 million of dedicated funding targeting gender equality as a principal objective, a majority was committed in the agriculture and rural development sector (USD 286 million).

OECD gender markers only indicate if the project targets gender equality and whether it is a mainstreamed objective for the project or fundamental for its design and expected results. It does not give nuances between projects that target resources to women and those that aim to transform gender relations. Oxfam found in 2017 that because aid recipient countries fail to gather sex-disaggregated data, it is impossible to track whether ODA reaches women farmers.<sup>21</sup> Tools exist that can be used to measure gender empowerment, such as the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index.<sup>22</sup> The gender gap in agriculture will never be closed if development policies don't aim at transforming women's roles in small-holder farming systems and rural food security. The root causes of chronic food insecurity and hunger will never be addressed until this is the case.



**ONE IN EVERY THREE WOMEN OF REPRODUCTIVE AGE WORLDWIDE SUFFERS FROM ANAEMIA, USUALLY DUE TO IRON-DEFICIENT DIETS.**

## RECOMMENDATIONS: TACKLING THE STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF THE FOOD PRICE CRISIS TO REDUCE GENDER INEQUALITIES AND ACHIEVE FOOD SECURITY

### Increase foreign aid to agriculture

- Donors should encourage multi-lateral agencies, such as the World Bank and IFAD, to increase the share of their agricultural spending that supports gender equality.
- Development aid providers should increase the quantity and quality of aid and support to focus on women smallholders promoting low-input, climate-resilient practices, particularly soil restoration, crop diversification, and water conservation/management.

### Increase national public investments in agriculture

- Developing-country governments should increase public investment in agriculture, with a focus on both women and men smallholder farmers and sustainable, climate-resilient approaches to agricultural development, and include specific line items in their agriculture budgets to support women farmers.
- Governments should support the participation of women farmers and women's rights organizations in budget decision making.
- African governments should prioritize meeting their AU commitments to allocate at least 10% of public expenditures to agriculture, with an emphasis on public investment rather than recurrent spending such as salaries for public officials.

### Making trade policy work for smallholders and women farmers

- Governments should develop accountability mechanisms to ensure transnational and national companies do not violate land rights and should ensure gender justice in land governance.

### Ensuring competitive markets and women's access to resources

- Governments should introduce or use existing competition law or anti-trust legislation to check against the accumulation and exercise of private power. For example, governments should regulate against high degrees of market concentration or anti-competitive behaviour and misuse of market power.
- Agriculture policies should target gender-based barriers that restrict women's access to inputs, resources, and services.

### Climate change

- All developed countries should increase their financing for adaptation, and commit to ensuring that it constitutes at least 50% of their overall public climate finance contributions by 2020.
- Donors should increase efforts to promote gender equality through their bilateral climate adaptation finance by ensuring at least 85% of adaptation projects have gender equality as a principal (marker 2) or significant (marker 1) objective, including at least 20% as a principal objective.

### Need for better data to assess gender inequalities in agriculture

- Research institutions and agrarian and economic policy forums should seek quality sex-disaggregated data, with strong gender indicators, from all actors, and especially governments and donors reporting on gender policy markers. They should also lead robust qualitative research to understand women's and men's experiences in agriculture.

### Guaranteeing participation and inclusiveness

- Governments and donors should support an inclusive agricultural transformation and create an enabling environment for farmers to exercise their rights. This should include reducing power imbalances and supporting national-level land reforms.
- Local communities, producer and farmer organizations, rural women's organizations, and other relevant civil society actors should be involved when agricultural and food policies and interventions are designed to ensure that they are responsive to the needs of local populations and support local food systems. Special attention should be paid to ensuring that women are able to participate in decision making at all levels.

### Defend the CFS role in food-security governance

- FAO Member States should defend the CFS by re-focusing the governance of food security on this platform, re-affirming its sole legitimacy in global food security governance, guaranteeing the decision making and accountability of states and reinforcing the participation of CSOs, and they should allocate adequate funding to its activities to provide sufficient leverage for action.

## Notes

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This paper was written by Hélène Botreau and Marc J. Cohen. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Lynn Brown, Sandrine Duruy, Aria Grabowski, Thierry Kesteloot, Armelle Le Comte, Thomas Lines, Eric Muñoz, Gabriel Pons, Rebecca Rewald, Marissa Ryan, Hanna Saarinen, Ruth Segal, Julie Seghers, Nicolas Vercken, Marita Wiggerthale, Timothy A. Wise, Nigel Willmott, and Helen Wishart in its production. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International under ISBN 978-1-78748-428-3 in March 2019.

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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Cover: Women farmers in the Behyepea community, Liberia, harvest their rice. Photo: Tommy Trenchard/Oxfam