

Food and Disaster Relief: Issues of Management and Policy

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The World Food Programme (WFP) is the food aid organization of the United Nations system and food aid plays a critical role in most disasters especially those of a protracted kind, that is to say famines caused by crop failure, a lack of purchasing power among affected communities or the displacement of people. In this lecture, delivered on 7 October, Mr. Ingram, focuses on this category of emergency rather than on sudden natural disasters.

WFP's Role as a Development and Humanitarian Agency

Although WFP handles each year about one quarter of global food aid — ten per cent of global, official development assistance — most of this food aid is used for development.

Relief work constitutes only about one third of WFP's total effort but its continuing involvement as a development agency in most developing countries puts it in a very good position to respond effectively to disasters. The reason for this is that, as an operational agency, it has staff in some 80 countries who are skilled in food management. WFP also as a rule has stocks of food in place for development projects which can be borrowed after an emergency occurs. This has been particularly important in WFP's speedy responses to sudden natural disasters.

WFP is delivering nearly 2.5 million tons each year of a wide variety of food commodities to many millions of beneficiaries. Indeed, at any one time, it is feeding over six million refugees and displaced persons alone. It is estimated that 35 million people in Africa were in receipt of food assistance during the crisis: WFP reached 19 million of them.

Complexity of Disaster Management

The management of protracted disasters is especially complex, indeed inherently so, in terms of a lack of accurate information; difficulties of mobilization and delivery on time of an adequate amount of a diverse range of food commodities, most of which are donated in kind by numerous donors; management and logistical deficiencies in many recipient countries and problems of financing internal distribution. In addition very often the whole operation must take place in situations of grave physical insecurity.

The task then is complex enough in itself but it is made more daunting because numerous other donors — both bilateral and non-governmental — are usually involved, having their own agendas and modes of operation.

An even greater challenge is the necessity to ensure to the greatest extent possible that the response does not worsen the underlying cause of the disaster. The wrong food delivered at the wrong time can be a disincentive in terms of future production.

Information Requirements

The *sine qua non* for good man-

agement at all stages is good information, first about the intended beneficiaries and secondly about all aspects pertaining to the acquisition and final delivery of food to the beneficiaries.

As regards beneficiaries, the starting point is identification of the needy. WFP provides assistance through governments and, in considering need, it must take account not only of the situations of potential individual beneficiaries but also of their governments.

The governing body of WFP has defined emergencies as "urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event has occurred which causes human suffering (or loss of livestock) and which the Government concerned has not the means to remedy; furthermore, that it is a demonstrably abnormal event which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale."

While this definition may seem simple enough, its application in practice is not. It involves a great deal of subjective judgement, as is evident from some of the questions raised by the definition. For example, what is the measure of human suffering? What level of social disruption can reasonably be termed exceptional? How urgent is urgent?

What is abnormal? How does one judge whether the remedy is beyond the resources of the Government concerned?

The exercise of judgement is further complicated by the fact that, in the last resort, the governments of afflicted countries have the primary responsibility for assessing the scope of the disaster. On the face of it, this is reasonable enough, since in theory the government is the only authority with the required understanding of local habits, traditional coping mechanisms and locally available resources. There has been, however, and there remains, a basic problem with assessment by the potential recipients of aid. They can underestimate needs for reasons of pride or political convenience and may delay requesting assistance until too late, or they can overestimate requirements hoping for more assistance to help them deal in practice with underlying structural imbalances in their economies. Donors generally fear the latter more than the former although, given the interest and power of the media and their influence on the general public, they cannot be happy with governments playing down disaster situations. There is, therefore, a distinct need for an outsider, generally an international agency, to help assess need and response requirements. It must have the expertise and integrity to be acceptable to both sides.

In assisting governments to assess need in the case of famine arising from drought, WFP's experience during the recent Africa crisis showed the inadequacy of current early warning systems despite praiseworthy efforts by the Food and Agriculture Organization, FAO, to improve them. The essential reason for this is the fact that in most of the poorest developing countries, data on plantings, rainfall and so on are at best scanty and often virtually non-existent.

The result is that for a great

many developing countries undergoing a crop failure we are not really in a position to make solid predictions virtually until the disaster is upon us; that is to say, the size of the crop deficit is known because the harvest is complete.

There is a general consensus that early warning systems are inadequate and in need of improvement. The feeling is that, in addition to improving our information about actual crop production or the state of livestock, parallel data should be gathered. An unusual volume of cattle sales accompanied by falling cattle prices, increasing rural unemployment and movement of labourers to other districts in search of work, sudden increases in cereal prices, even sales of family ornaments and jewellery, are all strong indicators that something is going wrong. Non-governmental organizations, which proved crucial in the delivery of emergency aid in the 1984-85 African famine, have established themselves solidly in many disaster-prone countries and can play a valuable role in contributing to this data gathering. Specific nutritional surveys can then be mounted to assess the situation in detail. UNICEF has shown strength in this field, notably in Mozambique, but such examples are still too limited, are not consolidated and would need to be followed by others.

While WFP is encouraging this kind of data-gathering, in the last resort, for many years to come, the element of subjectivity in judgement will remain high.

Needs of Refugees and Displaced Persons

The assessment of need in relation to refugee and displaced person situations is also difficult. This may seem paradoxical since the issue would seem to be no more than one of actually counting those affected. This matter is of particular importance to WFP because, on

average, 70 percent of our disaster food aid goes to this category of person.

Refugee numbers are sometimes exaggerated for political reasons and to provoke a more generous response. The refugees are often of the same ethnic origin as the host country border population and confusion is understandable. Moreover, the food supplied is often in short supply among the local population and it may be tempting to take advantage of its availability gratis. Often, organizing a census or registration is impossible due to lack of human and financial resources. Difficulties sometimes arise because host governments do not grant refugee status to the immigrants and in consequence problems about their entitlement to assistance arise. Governments may also be anxious to ensure that refugees are not better off than the host population and that assistance is not an incentive for an increased refugee influx.

Smoothing the Flow of Assistance

Problems of management often arise on account of the multiplicity of actors. When you have a very large famine like that in Africa recently, there is a laudable desire on the part of many governments and organizations to provide assistance. But it does not take much imagination to envisage the problems that can be created if much of the assistance which is needed over a period of many months arrives at the same time. Ports are congested, unloading is delayed, food spoils on the quayside because there is not enough storage capacity or transport to move it to the people most in need. Clearly, many of these problems would be easier to deal with if the provision of food aid — which amounts on average to about 70 percent of the international response to protracted disasters — was co-ordinated by a single agency. However apart from any other

consideration, since credit for and the identity of their gifts remains important to donors, it has not proved practical to get completely co-ordinated food aid flows. Instead, what WFP has sought to do is to organize a flow of information about needs, stocks, port capacities, ship arrivals, the movement of stocks out of ports, and so on, so that donors will be in a better position to make informed decisions about the amount and timing of their aid. This effort has been greatly appreciated by the international donor community and it is hoped that in future large-scale disasters, some of the problems of the kind that arose during the Africa crisis will be very much less severe.

Mobilization of Food Aid

WFP has itself provided in the last 10 years alone, more than five million tons of food valued at US \$1.7 billion for emergency operations. It manages, for this purpose, the International Emergency Food Reserve (IEFR) which has an annual target of 500,000 tons of commodities. Although consistently exceeded each year since 1982, the amount provided still does not provide a secure basis for the calls made upon it, even taking account of the fact that bilateral donors provide about three-quarters of emergency food aid. There are two main problems with the IEFR. First, it is not a fully multilateral reserve — some donors decide which emergencies their food will go to even if they rely on WFP assessments of the situation. Thus, the reserve is not sufficiently flexible to allow the Programme always to respond to the most deserving needs. Secondly, it is not a physical reserve and drawdowns are subject to the procurement procedures applicable in each donor country. What would be desirable is not a physical stock — we know the costs and complications — but a sort of IOU from donors allowing WFP to

draw from their national security stocks on demand. There is one donor who has agreed to this and I hope that others will follow suit.

WFP does not just provide donated food — it also buys food. Last year it spent over US \$90 million on the purchase of food, 80 per cent of it in developing countries, procuring some 567,000 tons in total.

WFP's unique situation as a global purchaser and deliverer of food places it in a better position than any other organization to purchase food in developing countries for disaster relief purposes. Its logistics experience is also virtually unique and gives it the ability to get food from a surplus-developing country to a deficit one nearby if that is at all feasible. For these reasons most donors entrust WFP with the purchase and delivery of bilaterally funded aid.

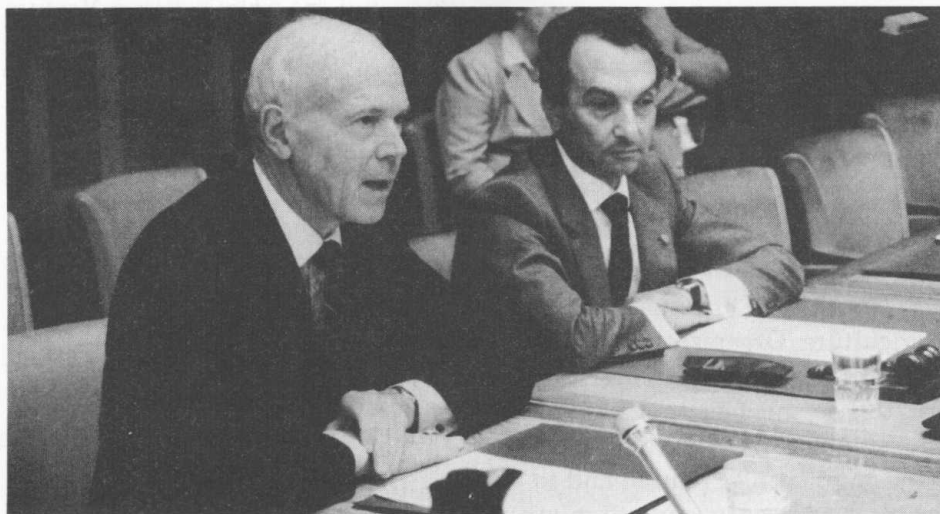
Internal Problems of Delivery in Recipient Countries

During the African famine, WFP acquired new expertise in inland logistics. WFP has always been skilled in shipping and port operations and has been able to provide assistance to governments in times of emergencies.

What it now has is a capacity to assist with virtually all aspects of internal logistics, including railway movements, airlifts, road and bridge repair and the setting up and management of large-scale trucking operations. WFP has turned over these operation to governments with the ending of the crises, except in Ethiopia where it manages the UN transport operation, responsible for handling a large proportion of relief aid.

Clearly these interventions, which have to be made at short notice, are not easy to manage and require a great deal of improvisation. They necessitate the engagement of many specialized staff and the acquisition of vehicles and repair equipment at short notice, all within the framework of the wishes of donors and the host government. Often, they have been made more difficult by the fact that WFP has had to rely exclusively on extra-budgetary funds to set the operations in motion.

Another frequent aspect of internal distribution problems is the failure of governments to provide the necessary cash resources for the distribution of the food they have donated. As a rule, WFP itself meets half the cost of internal



UNDRO

Mr. Ingram (left) addresses members of the international community at the UNDRO Lecture on 7 October at the Palais des Nations.

distribution of emergency food aid provided to poorer countries, but quite often governments cannot meet any of the costs themselves.

Security

Sometimes, with the best will in the world, obstacles encountered in reaching the neediest cannot be overcome. WFP will, for example, purchase food in one country for delivery to another. But the food must transit a third one which may suddenly place obstacles in the way of easy movement across its territory for reasons of politics or financial gain. Even countries from which food has been purchased may, for internal reasons, suddenly impose obstacles to its export. Equally, at the frontier of the afflicted country, all sorts of impediments may be placed in the way of getting the food to the neediest. Sometimes WFP performs miracles of logistical ingenuity, often at enormous expense relative to the value of the food involved, but to no avail in the face of what appears so often to be the primacy of politics.

Long-term Effects of Emergency Food Aid

WFP is deeply committed to the view that behind every famine there are root causes which need to be addressed to prevent future calamities. Famines are not caused by drought alone, nor do they end when rains come. They are the result of social, environmental and political conditions which must be changed. In this regard, it may be interesting to note that WFP is the agency (including the World Bank) which is currently investing the most in afforestation measures, designed to reverse ecological degradation, and without which the food and poverty problems of much of Sub-Saharan Africa cannot be solved.

Free Distribution of Food

Because governments of donor countries often respond to domestic public pressures, which are being influenced by pictures of starving children, and because there is a widespread, if ill-informed, view in many donor countries that their aid must go directly to the affected people, otherwise it may well be wasted, there are grave risks that legitimate disaster responses through the provision of free emergency food aid may set back efforts to deal with root causes of disasters. Wherever possible, food aid should be provided in such a way as not to reduce incentives to work by beneficiaries or to deal with underlying problems by governments. It is not always possible to plan food-for-work projects but much more could be done than is currently the case if the disincentive effects of free distribution were more widely perceived. Moreover, the best way of helping people, sometimes, is to sell food for the urban population, which may have sufficient purchasing power, and use the proceeds for cash-for-work projects in affected rural areas. After all, in many (but certainly not in all) famine situations, people are hungry not because there is no food available in the country but because they lack sufficient purchasing power. For the sake of their own human dignity they would far prefer to work for their food rather than receive a hand-out.

Of course, there are situations in which this is sometimes quite unavoidable but our task, through better early warning systems and more timely delivery of promised food aid, is to ensure that the conditions of human suffering which can give rise to the necessity for hand-outs as the only means of saving life, is avoided.

Untimely Delivery of Food

It is necessary for donors to ensure that emergency food aid for free distribution does not reach its destination at harvest time or otherwise after the period of critical need is over. This plays havoc with prices and other incentives and must be avoided at all costs. However, donors are often unwilling to face the domestic political consequences of explaining why they have not proceeded with the delivery of promised food aid.

These, then, are some sketchy reflections on the extraordinarily complex subject of food aid in protracted emergencies. Having pointed to so many problems I would like to end on a note of optimism. The fact is that there is now truly an international, humanitarian community of interest. This seems to me to be an enormous advance in terms of world history. We, that is to say peoples, governments, international and voluntary organizations, are committed to doing everything possible to help our fellow men who are facing death by starvation and, through our actions, we have shown that, by and large, we are doing the job.

I believe also that the UN system, on which particular responsibility falls for co-ordinating this outpouring of generosity, is doing a good job especially if full regard is paid to the political framework in which the UN operates. But we must not lose sight of the fact that people are hungry because they are poor and that, in consequence, we will never deal on a lasting basis with the famine problem unless we can deal first with the problem of poverty. The World Food Programme is absolutely committed to this.

(Abridged version)