

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?