

Food aid and livelihoods: challenges and opportunities in complex emergencies

by Valerie Guarnieri

While the first priority of the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) is to provide food aid to avert starvation, there is a growing recognition that more lives could be saved in the longer term by extending the focus of humanitarian assistance to include those at risk of losing their assets. Livelihood support activities must be based on careful analysis, sound programming and strong partnerships.

People affected by crises are not passive victims. To survive and recover they rely primarily on their own capabilities, coping mechanisms, resources and networks. They move in with family members or send their children to do so. They draw down on savings or take loans, move their herd to an area where there is adequate grazing land, switch to

drought-resistant crops or send a breadwinner to find work elsewhere. Even in areas experiencing protracted conflict and forced displacement, many people continue to try to pursue livelihoods and economic activities – whether in rural villages terrorised by rebel militias, urban areas inundated with displaced people or refugee camps.

Many of the strategies that people employ in order to meet their current food needs or preserve their assets undermine their health and well-being, jeopardising their ability to meet future food needs and to cope with further crises. Crisis-affected people often eat fewer, smaller and less nutritious meals in order to make what they have last longer without depleting their assets. Once displaced people lose access to their primary means of living, as well as ties and networks on which they would normally rely in times of stress, they are sometimes forced to turn to illegal forms of income generation, such as prostitution, theft or trafficking.

Women and woman-headed households face particular risk from negative coping strategies. Women are most likely to bear the brunt of food shortages, affecting their health as

well as the health and long-term potential of their unborn or young children. They often assume new responsibilities for their families' safety and economic well-being and security, as their husbands seek employment elsewhere or are conscripted into armed forces. Girls are the first to be pulled out of school or face early marriage when household livelihoods are at risk, and women may risk sexual abuse or enter into prostitution to protect their families' lives and livelihoods.

Protecting and supporting livelihoods as an early component of an emergency response can:

- be instrumental in safeguarding food security and people's productive capacity
- build recovery into the emergency response
- contribute to reducing relief dependency
- reduce agency costs: by the time people need relief to survive, their livelihoods are often already lost and thus they have greater and longer reliance on relief
- be more participatory, responding to what the beneficiaries want and addressing community priorities.

Options for food aid interventions in situations of forced migration are wide-ranging and often include distributions of full or partial food rations to the entire affected population or targeted sub-groups and support for nutrition programmes. To protect or rebuild livelihoods, innovative programmes provide food-for-work (to support agricultural production, restore productive, social or transport infrastructure and promote environmental recovery), food-for-training and/or school feeding activities. For such activities to be successful, they need to be tailored to the specific context and to address priorities identified by the beneficiaries, preferably by involving them in programme planning as well as implementation.

In Colombia food aid encourages IDPs to participate in activities focusing on restoring productive and social infrastructure as well as in training and capacity-building activities meant to

increase their income-earning potential. WFP's experience in Colombia has shown that IDPs are reluctant to invest in the development or rehabilitation of fixed assets when they fear that they will be displaced again. In this situation food-for-training – especially when it equips IDPs, who are largely from rural areas, with skills to enable them to better compete in urban labour markets – is well received. As a result, WFP has largely phased out its food-for-work programmes until viable resettlement is possible.

In Ethiopia food-for-work has successfully been used to rehabilitate land surrounding former refugee camps. Projects involved both refugees who were permanently resettling and members of their host communities. Participants were involved in site selection as well as in the food for work activities. Timing of the projects was key; WFP found that there was increased incentive to participate in the project when the food-for-work programmes were launched as full-ration free food distributions were being phased out. Moreover, when similar programmes were launched in other areas involving refugees who were still encamped, with little prospect of permanent settlement in the area, there was little involvement. Understandably, the refugees were more interested in engaging in rehabilitation activities when they realised that they, and their new communities, would benefit.

Limitations to protecting livelihoods

While it is increasingly recognised that humanitarian assistance should be used, as much as possible, to support livelihoods as a part of life-saving strategies, livelihood support is not without its challenges. It could make things worse and place beneficiaries at further risk as any form of humanitarian assistance, when introduced into a complex emergency typically characterised by a resource-strained environment, can play into the dynamics of the conflict. Food aid, as a very visible form of aid, may be particularly subject to manipulation. Assistance can affect the balance of power and may ultimately exacerbate or prolong a



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crisis even when it is effective in saving lives and alleviating suffering.

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This poses a number of challenges for WFP staff and other humanitarian workers. These include ensuring that sufficient aid is provided to people



Boy gathering local cereal, North Shewa, Amhara region, Ethiopia

who need it, when and where they need it; that the provision of aid is carried out in an efficient and safe manner for both staff and beneficiaries; and that relief interventions not only meet the beneficiaries' immediate needs but also do no harm.

Determining the number of people in need of assistance and the level of assistance required and keeping up to

date with changes is particularly difficult when emergencies involve people on the move. Displaced people are often spread over a large area and the refugee registration process may be politicised and lead to double counting. Lack of strong public institutions or reliable government counterparts results in serious information gaps, doubts about the reliability of data and difficulty in verifying information, particularly in the initial stages of an operation. New biometric techniques, including iris recognition and finger printing, are being piloted and show promise in introducing increased rigour into the registration process but need to take into account any cultural implications.

Targeting assistance to the most needy is always challenging, particularly when the aid criteria are at odds with local resource-sharing traditions, when authorities attempt to channel food aid in a way that addresses political or military objectives and where insecurity is high. When aid agencies try to target aid to IDPs or refugees without taking into account the needs of the host or surrounding communities, there may be resentment. Indeed, targeting is as much a political issue as it is technical, and the choices made can have serious impact on the effectiveness of the assistance, its side effects and the security risks faced by beneficiaries and staff. Ways of addressing it have included ensuring transparency in the planning and implementation of the distribution so that everyone knows who is being targeted and why. In some urgent situations, it may be necessary to provide additional food such that minimum needs are met even if there is some leakage to those who were not targeted.

Refugee and some internal displacement situations provide both serious constraints and potential opportunities for supporting livelihoods. Refugees and IDPs often have limited access to land, livestock, jobs or other sources of livelihood during their time of refuge, thus limiting their ability to pursue livelihood strategies. Security may also be an issue. Refugees in camps located near national borders may risk attack or conscription and access for aid workers may be difficult. Women face particular risk of abuse in implementing their livelihood strategies.

Despite these challenges, the existence of a UNHCR-led coordination structure in refugee camps to bring food and non-food assistance together under a common strategy could permit close linkages among sectors and better promote livelihood interventions. In addition, most refugee camps have functioning markets and some opportunities for labour - within the camp if not outside - which can support livelihood strategies.

For instance, a recent WFP case study in Guinea found that refugees can be engaged as skilled and unskilled labour in support of the relief effort (setting up tents, building health centres and sanitation systems or making bricks for sale to relief agencies). They can trade with other refugees or the host population (offering services or selling produce cultivated in small gardens, fish or processed goods) or can participate in small income-generation activities (such as tailoring or bread-making). The WFP-UNHCR Memorandum of Understanding, most recently updated in September 2002, highlights the importance of efforts to support asset-building activities and encourage the self-reliance of beneficiaries, which is a step in the right direction.

Food aid, however, is not always the most appropriate resource when seeking to preserve assets or support livelihoods. Livelihood interventions must be based on careful analysis of the current availability and accessibility of food for crisis-affected people, the impact that the crisis has had on men's and women's assets and livelihood strategies, and the role that food aid could play in both preserving assets and meeting household consumption needs. It is also important to take into account the impact that food aid would have on the policies, institutions and processes that influence livelihood strategies, particularly markets. Where food is available on the market and people simply do not have the means to gain access to it without depleting essential assets, cash interventions may be a preferred mode of response.

Implications for programming

Programming livelihood support assistance in complex emergencies requires:

- understanding how risks engendered by conflict make household livelihood systems vulnerable: political analysis of war economies is critical to analyse the violent processes that distort the environment in which livelihoods are pursued and livelihoods outcomes are realised
- linking pre-emergency interventions to emergency response: early warning, contingency planning, vulnerability analysis and both emergency and longer-term programmes must be coordinated to improve community resilience to risks
- using community-based indicators to track changes in vulnerability over time (such as asset sales, changes in food security status, increase in school drop-out rates and malnutrition levels and changes in overall health status)
- integrating livelihood assessments into emergency needs assessments: this involves documenting the livelihood strategies that women and men are pursuing, the assets that they rely on for their livelihoods and the policies, institutions and the processes that influence their ability to pursue coping strategies
- differentiating the strategies adopted and the risks faced by men and by women
- ensuring that emergency interventions take place early enough to reduce the need for negative coping strategies: this will require quicker and more predictable access to funding and local knowledge
- better advocacy on behalf of those at risk of losing livelihoods: situations where food assistance plays an important role in preserving assets and supporting livelihoods may require a larger quantity of food aid than those meeting immediate survival needs
- humanitarian agency staff should know and be able to incorporate into advocacy messages when food aid is an appropriate response and when it is not
- ensuring that all staff have the capacity to conduct participatory assessments, design and implement effective programmes, monitor the impact of their activities and incorporate gender considerations.

Strong partnerships are essential with organisations that understand the needs of communities and are open to a livelihoods approach. WFP should proactively bring partners into its assessment, analysis and programme design processes. Partnerships with international and local NGOs with expertise in emergency livelihoods support should be encouraged. WFP should also seek partnerships with governments, UN agencies and NGOs that can complement non-food resources with the food resources provided by WFP.

Valerie Guarnieri is a senior policy analyst and the leader of the Relief and Recovery Team in the Division of Policy, Strategy and Programme Support in the UN World Food Programme. Email: valerie.guarnieri@wfp.org



The Forced Migration Online team at the RSC has produced a resource page on **Livelihoods** complementing the theme of this issue of **FMR** at: www.forcedmigration.org/browse/thematic/livelihoods.htm

A staff member evaluates the state of crops at a WFP food-for-work project site, Guinea.

