

A new architecture for Food Assistance?

A new architecture for food assistance may be on the horizon, in the wake of an international conference on food aid. This paper considers the key elements of such an architecture, focusing on elements that may promote greater impact on underlying causes of food crises. Central to success is a sharper focus on risk and vulnerability.

If the emergent new architecture for food assistance is to be more successful than the current one in contributing to hunger reduction across the globe, it must do a much better job of addressing the root causes of food crises. That means that factors leading to unsustainable livelihoods must be identified and overcome.

It is now well understood that disaster risk is the combination of hazards and vulnerability. Disaster potential is unleashed when vulnerabilities are created, suggesting that disaster management is synonymous with vulnerability management.

There are no such things as “natural” disasters since they are caused by (based on) human and social vulnerabilities. Hazards may not be preventable but disasters may be.

Key elements of a new concept of “food assistance”

A focus on risk reduction and vulnerability establishes a common ground between actors in humanitarian and development settings, leading both to concentrate on prevention and disaster risk reduction. This suggests

Steven Were Omamo
President
New Growth International
Nairobi, Kenya
swomamo@newgrowthint.com

ity. Disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction must be embraced by all governments and donors. This is not straightforward since it is not so easy to show that disaster has been effectively prevented. It is much easier to demonstrate effective disaster response. Early warning systems (EWS) are critical, not simply as processes for data collection, but rather as people-centred mechanisms for identifying vulnerabilities and informing responses by a range of potential actors. A key issue thus is who controls and owns information, and thus whose agenda is driving the process.

The credibility of information generated by EWS is key to saving time and resources, suggesting that complementarities among monitoring systems used by different actors must be identified and exploited, and any contradictions removed. It is crucial to build confidence of both local communities and donors in EWSs. That may require efforts to integrate traditional community knowledge systems about hazards and potential impacts (especially those linked to natural phenomena) with science-based systems, thereby broadening and deepening the coverage of EWSs.

It is always the vulnerable groups that suffer most from disasters.



Photo: WFP/Marcus Prior



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Early warning systems are of crucial importance to reduce disaster risk in drought prone areas.

Disaster preparedness funds should be built up at different levels to enable quick and appropriate reactions by actors at local, national, and international level. Managing media relations and local communications is crucial in emergencies. There is an urgent need to build national capacities in this area.

Defining the role of food assistance

Food assistance can, and should, feature prominently not only as part of short-term responses to food crises, but also in long-term food security strategies. But it is important to remember that food assistance is not an alternative to coherent food security policy. All too often, food assistance (food

aid in particular) is asked to do the wrong things, or too much is asked of it. While food assistance may sometimes be necessary to achieve food security, it is never sufficient. Food assistance is but one among many tools available for fighting food insecurity. While food assistance must be used judiciously to yield its intended impacts, so, too, must other tools be similarly judiciously applied.

The factors that define food insecurity are myriad and often structural in nature. For food aid to carry out its promise in food security strategies, governments and development agencies must assign to food aid its proper strategic role.

On its own, food assistance will *never* be an appropriate tool to spur agricultural productivity growth where such growth is lacking due to underinvestment in agricultural research and extension systems. Such underinvestment and sluggish productivity growth in agriculture are typical in countries where food insecurity is significant.

Countries must do more in the area of disaster risk reduction, which comprises prevention, mitigation and preparedness. High-level political involvement is likely to be required. The five action areas set out in the Hyogo Framework for Action are logical starting points for mobilising such involvement, namely:

- 1 Ensuring that disaster risk reduction is a national and local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation;
- 2 Identifying, assessing and monitoring disaster risks and enhancing early warning;
- 3 Using knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience;
- 4 Reducing the underlying risk factors; and
- 5 Strengthening disaster preparedness for response at all levels.

Capacity development is crucial in all these areas in most countries. Simultaneously, the international community needs to invest in risk reduction in disaster prone areas, and not just in disaster response when crises break out.

The Berlin Consensus on a reform of the Food Aid Convention

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) organised an International Conference on "Food Aid – Exploring the Challenges" in Berlin, in May 2007. The conference provided a forum for discussion and for an exchange of views about the current challenges in food aid and food security as part of the preparations of the re-negotiation of the Food Aid Convention (FAC).

Conference participants agreed that while food aid is a valuable tool to address hunger, it cannot solve every food security or development challenge. Other instruments are also essential, such as investment in agriculture and rural development. A key point of consensus was the need to embrace the concept of "food assistance", rather than "food aid". This broader concept includes different instruments such as in-kind food aid, cash to facilitate food transfers, and micronutrients in a more comprehensive "toolbox" able to address a wider set of constraints and opportunities.

Additional principles agreed to guide reform of the FAC included:

- Higher commitment levels;
- Greater transparency;
- Peer review and evaluation;
- Multi-stakeholder participation;
- Sound needs assessment, including broader food and nutrition security aspects as well as market analysis, as the basis for food assistance and determining what form of assistance is most appropriate;
- A focus on best practices;
- A problem orientation; and
- Links to broader food security and development architecture and UN reform.

Zusammenfassung

Im Zuge der internationalen Konferenz über Ernährung im Mai 2007 in Deutschland könnte ein neues Konzept der Nahrungsmittelhilfe entstehen. Schlüsselemente eines solchen Konzepts, die in eine Reform der internationalen Nahrungsmittelhilfekonvention eingebunden werden sollten, sind eine stärkere Konzentration auf Katastrophenvermeidung und Senkung des Katastrophenrisikos. Nahrungsmittelhilfe sollte ferner nicht nur ein Bestandteil kurzfristiger Reaktionen auf Nahrungskrisen sein, sondern auch in langfristigen Strategien zur Ernährungssicherung berücksichtigt werden. Dabei ist jedoch stets zu beachten, dass Nahrungsmittelhilfe keine

Alternative zu einer konsequenten Politik der Ernährungssicherung sein kann. Zu bedenken ist immer, dass die Nahrungsmittelhilfe weder den schlechten Zugang der Armen zu Nahrungsmitteln beseitigen noch ein Ausgleich für die Folgen einer ungeeigneten Landwirtschaftspolitik sein kann.

Resumen

Como resultado de la conferencia internacional sobre ayuda alimentaria llevada a cabo en mayo de 2007 en Alemania, se vislumbra una nueva arquitectura de la asistencia alimentaria. Los elementos clave de una estrategia de asistencia alimentaria, que deberían incorporarse en una reforma del Convenio sobre la Ayuda

Alimentaria, son un mayor enfoque en la prevención de desastres y la reducción del riesgo de desastres. Además, la asistencia alimentaria debería ocupar un lugar prominente – no sólo entre las respuestas de corto plazo a crisis de alimentos – sino también en las estrategias de seguridad alimentaria de largo plazo. Pero es importante recordar que la asistencia alimentaria no es un sustituto para una política coherente de seguridad alimentaria. Es necesario tener en mente que la asistencia alimentaria nunca podrá ser una herramienta apropiada para corregir deficiencias de mayor envergadura en el acceso a los alimentos, o para resolver las escaseces de alimentos debidas a políticas agrarias inadecuadas.

Food assistance will *never* be an appropriate tool for correcting widespread poor access to food where food markets are characterised by major capital and infrastructural constraints, very high transaction costs, limited market information, high risk, and several non-competitive elements. Such conditions are typical in countries where food insecurity is significant. Food-for-Work, building local roads and infrastructure, and local procurement of food aid could help overcoming these constraints.

Food assistance will *never* be the best way to bridge food gaps when inappropriate policies induced artificial barriers to movement of food between surplus and deficit areas, both within and across national borders. Such policies are typical in countries and regions where food insecurity is significant.

Food assistance is not an alternative to a coherent food security policy, particularly in the case of a natural disaster.

Food assistance will *never* correct such fundamental impediments to food security.

Conclusions

Clearly, there will be several new organisational challenges to be overcome as the new food assistance architecture is constructed. However, the fundamental challenge will remain the same, namely how to retain the high degree of precision

essential to delivering the right vulnerability-reducing livelihood support to the right people at the right time, under extreme biophysical and socio-economic stress and diversity, while, simultaneously, promoting operation at scales required to address humanitarian crises and achieve meaningful development impact. Unless the new architecture responds adequately to this challenge, the problems that have plagued the current architecture will persist.



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