

6. Conclusions

Good practice in terms of ration distribution is not just a matter of technical issues of planning rations and logistics. To be successfully applied, good practice must take into account the wider context. Food aid has an impact on the local social, economic and political processes and is affected by them. If this is ignored, food assistance is unlikely to meet its original objectives, or worse, will be manipulated by powerful groups, at the expense of the intended beneficiaries.

For too long, the social, economic and political dimensions of food assistance have been ignored, with consequent diversion and manipulation of food aid. These aspects have major implications at all stages of the food distribution process, as described in this review. Political considerations at the international level may seem beyond the influence of the relief worker, but at the local level, unless local power relations are taken into account, they will have a significant impact on UN programme outcomes. In such circumstances, the relief worker is little more than a pawn in a wider game.

The western model of relief justifies interventions in narrow technical terms. Donors and UN agencies make a clear distinction between food aid for emergencies and for development (saving lives as opposed to supporting self-sufficiency). This Review shows that in reality a clear division cannot be drawn between the nutritional and economic goals of emergency food distribution. In all emergency contexts, food rations are used as an economic as well as a nutritional resource, and in some, the uses are more economic. This has implications for the targeting and the planning of rations.

Many of the existing agency guidelines lack clear guidance on certain major technical issues, such as targeting and actual implementation, while almost all ignore the social and political context. This narrow focus provides an opportunity for decision-makers to justify political priorities in technical terms. By ignoring the social and political issues the relief worker gives a 'carte blanche' to those groups and agencies who manipulate food aid for their own political purposes. It is imperative that the relief community takes responsibility for gaining a deeper understanding of the local social and political context, and applying this knowledge to planning and implementing food distributions. Obviously this is done to a certain extent, although not always explicitly. At present this is not standard procedure as presented in guidelines, and in a wider sense is not generally considered an aspect of 'good practice'.

Conceptual thinking and analysis is fundamental for a better understanding of the processes at work in emergencies. It serves as the basis for assessments, planning rations and designing strategies for identifying and reaching target groups. It is not enough to consider overall food deficits or even the local coping strategies, without analysing 'who is at risk and why'? Checklists given in guidelines cannot be used to unravel the complex relationships that influence the need for food distribution and its success. A conceptual framework is a practical tool for conceptual thinking as it encourages people to consider the linkages and relationships between key factors and also their relative importance. Limited conceptual understanding leads to narrow objectives, or no objectives at all. In the absence of clear objectives, logistical targets may take over; programmes become logistics-driven, rather than needs driven.

Currently, there is no single conceptual framework for use in emergencies and a wide range of approaches exist (see Chapter 3). In the absence of an overall conceptual framework for use in emergencies, this Review suggests the use of the UNICEF framework, taking into account the fact that it fails to address the needs of people other than women and children, and also that it is intended for use in a peacetime developmental context, not an emergency potentially bound up in politics, war and conflict. It therefore must be modified to take account of the local coping strategies, and the impact of war and conflict on the three groups of underlying causes of malnutrition and mortality: food security, adequate maternal and childcare, and access to health services and the health environment.

The entire process of food distribution, from assessment to final monitoring and evaluation, is based on the western model of relief which assumes that food shortages lead to hunger, malnutrition and death, which can be prevented by food distribution. In reality, actual programmes are shaped significantly by the perspectives and priorities of the affected population and the particular local context. This produces a dual reality, one for fieldworkers and one for local people. The former is based on the technical principles of good practice, while the latter is the social, economic and political reality. True, 'good practice' represents the coming together of the two worlds. Good practice is based on sound theoretical principles. However, in practice, these principles may be impossible to apply, and therefore programmes are modified for pragmatic reasons.

The need for pragmatism has not been explicitly recognised by policy makers and technicians, who continue to make recommendations and prepare guidelines based on theoretical principles only. As a consequence, practitioners have little guidance on how to put these principles into practice, or how to deal with practical constraints. Relief strategy and accountability is often left to the implementing relief agency, without guidance or support from donor or coordinating UN agency. Food is often provided by donors on condition that it is effectively targeted at those most in need, yet guidelines are not clear about effective strategies for the identification of target groups. In planning rations, practitioners have guidance on which factors to take into account, but not on how to do this. It is often practitioners who have to set ration scales based on available food stocks, rather than based on nutritional requirements and other technical criteria.

In the process of food distribution, the link between assessment and planning rations is weak. Whereas assessments have advanced from a simplistic view of famine as a food availability decline, to approaches which take into account entitlements and coping strategies, food needs are usually still planned on the basis of estimates of food deficits or numbers of people affected, multiplied by standard rations.

Although most agencies recommend that access to food, trading of food aid, and coping strategies are taken into account in planning rations, in general, rations are mainly planned on the basis of nutritional requirements. A realistic approach to planning rations, which recognizes that these factors cannot be measured quantitatively, would allow the planning of rations to progress from a food deficit approach to one which takes into account entitlements and coping strategies. Estimates of access to other food sources are just that – estimates. Any planned ration based on criteria other than nutritional requirements is essentially an informed guess

and needs to be flexible.

One of the main constraints in the planning and coordination of the entire food distribution process is that different actors are responsible for different aspects of the process, none of whom have a thorough understanding of the process as a whole. Different aspects of food distribution may be implemented by different agencies, and even within an agency, nutrition, food aid, and logistics may be the responsibility of different staff in different sections. Staff at headquarters may make guidelines for food distributions, but practitioners may have to develop strategies based on a totally different reality.

The low numbers and positions of all staff responsible for aspects of food distribution reflect the low importance attached to food distribution by most agencies. This is clearly an anomaly, given that food aid is the single most important response in emergencies, and that the consequences of mismanagement are disastrous. A first step in improving food distribution must be for all actors to recognize the complexities of food distribution, and take action in terms of appropriate technical and financial input, and organizational change.

Nutritionists are in an ideal position to plan and monitor food distributions, taking into account the linkages and relationships between all factors influencing food distribution. However, nutritionists have become side-tracked by the search for the 'nutritionally adequate ration', and better and more accurate methods of estimating requirements. Estimates of nutritional requirements are useful as planning figures, to use as the basis for planning rations, but careful examination of the way in which a population's average nutritional requirements are estimated exposes the nutritionally adequate ration as a myth. The focus on technical issues has been to the detriment of finding approaches to overcome practical constraints and methods for implementation.

In this review we have shown that in reality, it is the dictates of the pipeline that determine the actual rations, which is in turn determined by the priorities of host governments and donors, agency responsibilities and coordination, constraints of logistics and infrastructure, and the degree of loss and diversion. Given the reality of food aid supplies and the context of current emergencies, the quest for the best formula to calculate adequate rations is futile. There are many other areas where our efforts would be better spent, as identified by this review of practice. For example:

- The development of a conceptual framework for emergencies;
- Realistic targeting strategies that reflect a combination of insider and outsider priorities based on a process of consultation and negotiation;
- The identification of systems to implement emergency food distribution that are appropriate to the local social and political context;
- Development of institutional arrangements that will allow for effective coordination in planning and monitoring food distribution.

Improvements in any one of the above would help maximise the impact and

effectiveness of the resources that are available locally.

This Review partly reflects the authors' personal experience, combined with a selection of agency guidelines, publications and internal reports. However, the collective experience of the international relief community is, of course, much wider and more diverse than that presented here. Significant advances in the provision of humanitarian relief can only come from a collective commitment to critically reviewing each aspect of distribution that the authors have briefly touched upon in this Review.