

Evaluation of European Commission integrated approach of food security and nutrition in humanitarian context

Executive Summary

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Humanitarian Outcomes



The opinions expressed in this document represent the views of the authors, which are not necessarily shared by the European Commission.

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Acronyms

ACF	Action contre la Faim
BCC	Behaviour change communication
BSFP	Blanket supplementary feeding programme
CFSVA	Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis
CFW	Cash-for-work
CHF	Common Humanitarian Fund
CMAM	Community-based management of acute malnutrition
CoD	Cost of diet
CSB	Corn Soya Blend
CSI	Coping Strategy Index
CTC	Community-based therapeutic care
DDS	Dietary diversity score
DfID	Department for International Development (UK)
DEVCO	Development and Cooperation – EuropeAid
DG ECHO	Directorate-General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (European Commission)
EDF	European Development Fund
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FBF	Fortified Blended Foods
FCS	Food Consumption Score
FEWS NET	Famine Early Warning System Network
FFW	Food-for-work
FSNSP	Food Security National Surveillance Project
GAM	Global Acute Malnutrition
HEA	Household Economy Approach
HFA	Humanitarian Food Assistance
HIP	Humanitarian Implementation Plan
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDDS	Individual dietary diversity score
IPC	Integrated Food Security Phase Classification
IYCF	Infant and Young Child Feeding
IYCN	Infant and Young Child Nutrition
JAM	Joint Assessment Mission
LNS	Lipid-based Nutrient Supplement
MAM	Moderate Acute Malnutrition
MNP	Micronutrient powder
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NCA	Nutrition Causal Analysis
OFDA	Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (US)
OTP	Out-patient Therapeutic Programme
PDM	Post-distribution monitoring
PLW	Pregnant and lactating women
PLWHA	People living with HIV/AIDS

RUF	Ready-to-use food
RUTF	Ready-to-use therapeutic food
SAM	Severe Acute Malnutrition
SCUK	Save the Children UK
SMART	Standardized Monitoring and Assessment of Relief and Transitions
SUN	Scaling Up Nutrition
SWD	Staff Working Document
TA	Technical Assistant
TIP	Technical Issues Paper
UK DfID	see DfID
UNHCR	UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WFP	World Food Programme
WHZ	Weight-for-height z-score

Executive summary

Introduction

1. Poor nutrition has been declared the single most important threat to world health (UNICEF et al., 2012). Globally, around 165 million children suffer from stunting; and around 52 million, or 8 per cent, of the world's under-five children are wasted (ibid). The past ten years have seen a surge in interest in undernutrition from various directions. Alongside several other global actors, the European Commission (EC) has increased its focus on the problem. Within DG ECHO, this began in 2010 with a refinement of its approach to humanitarian food assistance to strengthen the focus on the consumption of sufficient, safe and nutritious food.
2. The present evaluation was commissioned to assess DG ECHO's operational capacity to fund integrated food security and nutrition operations in line with the Humanitarian Food Assistance Communication (2010) and related policies. It asks whether DG ECHO-funded food assistance supports, or perhaps hinders, attention to the relevant immediate and underlying causes of acute undernutrition. It examines whether nutrition objectives have been integrated at all stages of the food assistance programme cycle (situation analysis/assessment, causal analysis, response analysis, targeting and design, implementation and monitoring) and whether food assistance has been linked to direct nutrition interventions, where appropriate. The evaluation covers DG ECHO-funded food assistance from 2009 to 2012, taking 2012 into account where possible. The methodology has involved a document review; 137 interviews at headquarters, regional and country levels; analysis of 50 randomly selected food assistance projects; and three case studies in Bangladesh, Niger and South Sudan.

Findings

3. At present, nutrition is not consistently an objective of DG ECHO-funded food assistance. Fewer than half of the DG ECHO food assistance projects analysed were found to include nutrition-related results or outcomes. Practice varied: projects in Niger had nutrition more in focus, in line with DG ECHO's Sahel strategy to address acute undernutrition, compared to a more limited focus in South Sudan and Bangladesh. In all the case studies, there were food assistance projects which did not acknowledge the problem of acute malnutrition in any way. This seems problematic, given the high baseline Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rates in all three contexts.
4. Evidence from the case studies indicates that neither the rates of acute malnutrition nor the speed of onset or duration of the crisis would appear to have significant influence on the integration of nutrition objectives into programmatic response. Such integration seems determined more by the availability of data, access, partner capacity, policy coherence amongst government and other development partners, and broader regional factors. In many contexts, including South Sudan and Bangladesh, GAM rates remain above emergency thresholds for long periods.
5. Increasingly, DG ECHO's food assistance partners are taking into consideration information on acute malnutrition in situation assessments, a practice actively encouraged by DG ECHO. Some partners, in particular a few cross-sectoral INGOs, have developed sophisticated ways of analysing causes and assessing nutrition problems. Overall, partners provide good

information on food availability and food access, including costs – but insufficient information on food intake and food utilisation, despite the relevance of these elements.

6. Partners' analyses of causes of undernutrition are sometimes cursory, with the implicit assumption that food access in itself will ensure adequate nutrition. In contexts where nutrition is clearly in focus, as in Niger, there is a need to look more deeply into the causes of malnutrition, to shed light on types of interventions that might be most effective. This point appeared to be better investigated in South Sudan, albeit on a limited scale.
7. DG ECHO encourages its partners to link response to analysis in a logical way. However, it has been inconsistent in its encouragement of multi-sectoral approaches. In Niger DG ECHO only funds the food assistance and nutrition sectors, whereas in South Sudan it encourages an integrated, multi-sector approach. Globally, DG ECHO lacks clarity around when it will consider certain responses, for example the use of specialised food products and the treatment of moderate acute malnutrition (MAM). The evidence also indicates that DG ECHO is not sufficiently emphasising some types of interventions, such as the promotion of better infant and young child feeding (IYCF); DG ECHO now plans to develop guidance on IYCF, which could help to address this. Some partners felt that DG ECHO was overly encouraging the use of cash responses, even when it was not suitable for nutrition.
8. DG ECHO has encouraged improvements in monitoring the nutrition-specific objectives of food assistance, mainly through the development of operational guidance and the role of the regional advisers. Over half of projects analysed globally included one or more indicators for nutrition in the logframe. However, partners' monitoring varies considerably, from sophisticated to rudimentary. With some exceptions, DG ECHO encourages partners to measure outcomes (e.g. food consumption score, coping strategies index, dietary diversity score) rather than impact (i.e. nutrition status). There is concern that household-level indicators are not adequate for monitoring whether all members of the household (children in particular) have adequate intakes.
9. Some DG ECHO supporting partners have conducted relevant, high-quality operational research which examines good and bad practices and active lesson-learning on integration and linkages. This work could serve as models for others. However, there remain important evidence gaps – for instance, as regards IYCF interventions, the use of specialised foods and blanket feeding. Partners do not always understand why and when DG ECHO supports operational research, indicating the need for greater collaboration with partners on research priorities.
10. DG ECHO has encouraged linkages between food assistance and nutrition-specific interventions. Some DG ECHO-funded food assistance, notably in Niger, has developed good linkages, e.g. through screening food assistance recipients for acute malnutrition, overlapping general food with blanket feeding distributions, and ensuring that families of acutely malnourished children are included in food assistance (when these households are food-insecure). Overall, most linkages involved treatment for acute malnutrition, whereas there were fewer examples of linkages with IYCF or micronutrient initiatives. The global

project analysis found that in less than two-thirds of the projects studied, no mention was made of any operational links to nutrition-specific interventions.

11. Despite a rise in the use of specialised foods, DG ECHO-funded food assistance does not take sufficient account of the nutritional requirements of the target population, i.e. the adequacy of the food basket. In some instances DG ECHO has encouraged its partners (especially WFP) to provide nutritionally appropriate foods – or ensure that those receiving cash or vouchers are able to purchase. These efforts have not always been successful, however, due not least to challenges encountered in simply delivering the staple foods. In particular, transfers (cash and in-kind food) often fail to address meaningfully the specific nutritional needs of children or pregnant or lactating women, even though these additional needs are well documented, particularly in the case of children. DG ECHO is not yet making sufficient efforts to improve in this area.
12. Similarly, neither DG ECHO nor its partners take sufficient account of the degree to which food can be utilised, even though this is a key determinant of food intake. Partners did encounter food utilisation issues in their programming, and many problems related to storage, preparation, fuel access, gender and the division of labour require greater understanding.
13. Partners select works projects (cash or food for work) based on community input; these usually have aims related to livelihoods, disaster preparedness, or water and sanitation. The projects may or may not have an indirect nutritional impact; nutrition impact is generally not explicitly considered. Part of the challenge lies in the wide range of competing priorities with cash and food-for-work projects.
14. There is limited consideration of the possible negative nutrition impacts for vulnerable groups involved. Interviewees indicated that there is some evidence of poor practice in this area and that programmes need to better address this in targeting and design.
15. Many food assistance projects include nutrition-related training for beneficiaries as a condition for receiving assistance. However, this is by no means standard practice; and DG ECHO's largest partner, WFP, has recognised that it could do more to link nutrition awareness with transfers. More work is required to identify situations in which such training or education is most likely to be effective and appropriate.
16. Internally in DG ECHO, awareness varies as to the Communication on Humanitarian Food Assistance (HFA). At the field level in the case studies, there is weak appreciation of the policy. Most field staff understand the spirit or intent of the guidance, but are often unfamiliar with the specifics of the policy itself.
17. Interviewees spoke of several DG ECHO tools and guidance as potentially very useful for programming. In the case studies, some regional advisers used the tools to guide proposals, which probably had a positive impact on response choice and monitoring indicators. Overall, however, awareness of them remains limited, and there is confusion regarding the status of various drafts and how these should be shared with partners. In particular, there is a gap between the guidance and discussion in Brussels and the regional hubs, and what DG ECHO

staff and partners understand at country level. Regional advisers are critical in the dissemination process.

18. The evaluation examined whether certain broader, systemic challenges experienced when creating linkages between food assistance and nutrition have been addressed, including coordination, partner capacity, information and assessment and linkages to development partner mechanisms and policies. It found that while DG ECHO has worked on these challenges, the strategic dialogue with key food assistance actors (notably WFP) has not advanced as far as it could, and better coordination with other key food assistance donors (including USAID) might help this. There is a need for greater emphasis on strategic planning for country-level food assistance and nutrition coordination, country-level capacity building and engaging Development and Cooperation – EuropeAid (DEVCO) to link assistance to food security and nutrition programmes in-country more effectively.

Table: Conclusions and recommendations

Question	Conclusions	Recommendations
EQ1: To what extent have selected DG ECHO-funded Food Assistance projects successfully integrated nutrition objectives?	<p>Partners increasingly consider malnutrition in their assessments, but not in sufficient detail, particularly as to food consumption and utilisation.</p> <p>Project proposals rarely discuss a range of causal factors for malnutrition. More in-depth analysis of the specific causes of malnutrition can be aid in designing better responses.</p> <p>Although their support to cash transfers is widely appreciated, DG ECHO has sometime focused overly on the use of cash-based responses within food assistance, and has been inconsistent in its encouragement of multi-sectoral approaches.</p> <p>DG ECHO is inconsistent in its support for specialised food products in programming and the treatment of moderate acute malnutrition (MAM).</p> <p>DG ECHO has not sufficiently emphasised interventions to</p>	<p>Decide whether it is a priority for DG ECHO partners to ensure that works projects have a nutrition impact, given the competing priorities for food and cash transfers; and place the emphasis accordingly.</p> <p>Conduct a brief review of good practice as regards operational linkages in some contexts, and disseminate this through the food security and nutrition regional advisers. The review could include liaising with TAs for examples of projects where good operational linkages have been made. This could be cross-checked with partners.</p> <p>Urge partners to consistently take into account IYCF issues within food assistance interventions, e.g. to do no harm in terms of breastfeeding and childcare.</p> <p>Work with WFP and others to move away from basing the size of cash transfers on the cost of WFP food basket, and more towards a cost of healthy diet. Consider what people actually buy, not what they should buy.</p> <p>Do not focus overly on cash-based responses, or food assistance in general, in impacting nutrition: be open to emerging evidence on what types of interventions have the greatest effect and at what cost.</p> <p>Consider funding coordinated nutrition causal analyses in countries with high baseline acute</p>

	<p>promote better infant and young child feeding (IYCF).</p> <p>Some DG ECHO-funded food assistance makes good operational linkages to nutrition-specific interventions, but this is not standard.</p> <p>Many transfers (in-kind and cash) do not sufficiently take into account the nutritional requirements of the target population (i.e. adequate food basket), especially children or pregnant or lactating women.</p> <p>Partners do not select work projects (within cash-for-work or food-for-work) based on their nutritional impact.</p>	<p>malnutrition rates and frequent shocks or crises.</p> <p>Consider funding programmes to support IYCF, including breastfeeding, in particular those with an operational research component, to improve the evidence base.</p> <p>Within the limits of DG ECHO's budgeting system, adopt a flexible approach to allow for changes in the amount of cash transfer per household during programming (e.g. to reflect significant changes in market prices).</p> <p>Encourage partners to consider a combination of in-kind food assistance and cash (rather than just one or the other), particularly when appropriate foods (e.g. nutrient rich foods for young children) are not consistently available or accessible.</p>
EQ2: To what extent and which operational tools (e.g. assessment, monitoring, reporting tools) have been used to link food security and nutrition in humanitarian interventions?	<p>DG ECHO has encouraged improvements in monitoring. However, some consumption measures used as a proxy for intake within the household are not sufficient to monitor whether all in the household (particularly children) have adequate intake.</p>	<p>Continue with plans to develop specific guidance on IYCF in emergencies, and ensure that existing guidance tools include IYCF programming and address IYCF.</p> <p>Consider ways¹ to support the development of indicators or monitoring approaches that measure individual dietary intake, especially of children. This could include a feasibility study with one of DG ECHO's main food assistance partners on the use of individual dietary diversity score (IDDS), for example.</p> <p>Consider consolidating technical and generalist guidance into single, user-friendly documents.</p> <p>Where possible, disseminate relevant guidance tools to partners.</p> <p>Consider providing funding to support building partners' capacity around existing assessment tools (this could be carried out either by partners or relevant clusters).</p>
EQ3: To what extent has the guidance of the Communication	<p>There is weak appreciation of the HFA Communication by DG ECHO staff and partners and (with some exceptions)</p>	<p>Develop a new strategy for dissemination of the HFA Communication and related guidance, recognising staff turnover particularly in the field.</p>

¹ In addition to the country-level consultations described under EQ3.

<p>on Humanitarian Food Assistance (HFA) strengthened the integration of nutrition in food assistance actions?</p>	<p>limited use of the operational guidance tools.</p>	<p>Review current DG ECHO staff knowledge and capacity regarding nutrition-sensitive approaches in food assistance, and consider additional training needs.</p> <p>Recognising that partners change and partner staff turnover can be high, continue to conduct country-level consultations with partners to discuss the HFA Communication and how they incorporate into their programmes.</p>
<p>EQ4: To what extent does the specific context (rapid-onset shock, slow-onset crisis and protracted crisis) influence the integration of nutrition aspects in food assistance projects?</p>	<p>The type of crisis (rapid-onset, slow-onset or protracted) does not appear to influence the integration of nutrition as much as do other factors like the availability of data, access, partner capacity, policy coherence amongst government and development partners, and broader regional cohesion. There is a lack of a national-level picture on nutrition status in some contexts, which hinders needs-based responses.</p>	<p>Where basic nutritional data are weak, consider either jointly funding with other humanitarian donors or encouraging development partners to fund improved nutrition information systems and the incorporation of key nutritional data within food security monitoring.</p>
<p>EQ5: To what extent have challenges experienced when creating linkages between food assistance and nutrition been addressed?</p> <p>EQ6: To what extent have DG ECHO partners actively promoted and applied linking food security and nutrition, and what were the reasons if they were not able to do so?</p>	<p>Donors have no forum through which they can regularly coordinate on this issue at global level.</p> <p>Global- and field-level coordination and strategic planning between the food security and nutrition sectors is weak.</p> <p>DG ECHO is not able to support and advocate policy issues directly with the government.</p> <p>Partner capacity in the area of linking food security and nutrition is inconsistent.</p>	<p>Identify a forum to coordinate more with other donors, particularly USAID/Food for Peace, on policy, operational approaches and research into the role of specific nutritional products.</p> <p>At the global level, participate more consistently and strategically in the relevant clusters and cross-sector working group.</p> <p>Conduct a brief internal review of ways in which DG ECHO has conducted effective advocacy on issues related to nutrition with various actors, e.g. in the Sahel, and consider lessons for other contexts.</p> <p>At the field level, consider funding support to improved partner coordination and planning.</p> <p>Encourage partners to consider their field-level capacity as regards integrating nutrition into food assistance, and allow partners to incorporate identified needs into their budgeting and proposals. Encourage partners to engage in cross-agency collaboration in order to build capacity.</p>