

Food aid: For or against?

by François Grunewald

Introduction

For or against food aid? When looking at the pictures of famine and malnutrition that abound on the small screen, this question may seem at best incongruous and at worst inadmissible. And yet it should be taken at its face value — provocative and stimulating, intended not to discourage but rather to sharpen our minds, for behind this simplistic question lie some real political stakes, some genuine issues of humanitarian ethics and some fascinating methodological problems. Our task here should perhaps be to single out the “operational” angles and then to reply to the questions “**When**”, “**Why**” and “**How**” food aid should be provided, and finally to the question “**How can we do without it?**”. As the global balance between supply (food resources) and demand (the needs) breaks down, access to these resources becomes more and more difficult for an increasingly large sector of the population, while at the same time the enormous stocks of the 1980s have melted away. Food aid has therefore become a rare commodity, to be used judiciously and in the most appropriate manner.

This study consists of four parts. The first, “historical”, part will provide some keys to understanding current trends in food aid. The second, more “methodological”, part will describe some of the advances made in the use of food aid in crisis situations, with particular reference to the action taken by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The third part will be devoted to several questions concerning food aid in “development” situations, and, in conclusion, some recommendations of principle concerning the role and place of various purveyors of aid are offered, together with some ethical considerations.

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We must begin by defining what we are talking about. In emergency situations, the first objective is to save lives. Food aid covers a broad spectrum of activities, ranging from the distribution of large quantities of various commodities, to feeding programmes conducted under medical supervision, to various systems of community kitchens. From Somalia to Angola, from Sierra Leone to Cambodia, the ICRC and many other organizations have developed emergency food aid programmes through which hundreds of thousands of tonnes of food have been channelled to millions of beneficiaries over recent decades (WFP, 1995).¹ It will be seen below that for the ICRC at any rate this food aid in crisis periods also serves other ends: protecting what remains of societies to enable them to establish their own survival strategies, limiting or arresting the processes of destitution of families and decapitalization of agricultural production and so forth. In “development” contexts, efforts are made to use food aid as a lever for development, as a catalyst for creative dynamism and sometimes as a tool for preventing impending food crises (Longhurst, 1992). There is much talk of “Food for Work”, such as the projects for strengthening anti-flood dykes in Bangladesh or building roads in Nepal. There are a number of other concepts, such as the efforts to stabilize prices by means of food aid which proliferated in the Sahel in the 1980s, or the systems for monetizing aid through programmes involving counterpart funds, tried out by the European Union in Angola and by CARE in Somalia. Questions about the merits of various programmes (Fryer, 1981), analysis of “areas of validity” and the cost of certain types of action, reflections on methods of need assessment and impact evaluation and economic studies on the secondary effects of aid have already been the subject of many publications, the conclusions of which vary greatly according to the viewpoint selected and the aspect of food aid taken into account.

In search of a historical perspective

Since the end of the Cold War, the main concern has no longer been to support one side or the other, but on the contrary to compel certain parties involved in conflict to make peace. The aim is thus to solve, or sometimes simply to contain, the crises which for one reason or another threaten the political and economic stability of certain regions. In these situations, new strategies have emerged for the use of humanitarian assistance, and in particular food aid — not to call it the food weapon (Bessis, 1985). This is only the latest episode in a long story which we must now unfold.

¹ See Bibliography, p. 606.

Rice, peanuts, junk food and slaves, or the ruin of rural economies

During the colonial era, the introduction of triangular trade between France, Indochina and the African colonies considerably affected local agricultural systems. By disposing of traditional food products through low-price sales of Cochin-Chinese rice and establishing a coercive fiscal policy (colonial taxes on salt or based on the number of people in a family, compulsory provision of services), the colonial power was able to develop cash crops, particularly in Africa (Rau, 1991). The farmers of the Senegalese peanut belt are all too well aware of the consequences of this development: ruined ecosystems, impoverished soil, increased vulnerability of peasant economies trying to compete on the international agricultural market (Dumont, 1962 and 1975). In addition, the local trade in cereals was greatly hampered and destructured by new consumption habits, with such imported items as rice and bread assuming an increasingly important place on the housewife's shopping list, especially in urban areas. There is a long list of countries where trade and food-aid programmes have profoundly disrupted traditional consumption patterns: spaghetti in Somalia, bread in Viet Nam and Cambodia, rice in Senegal and Mali and so forth (George, 1977).

Grain as a weapon in Cold War geopolitics

Strategies for the political use of food aid emerged side by side with this commercial approach, one of the first well-documented examples being that of the assistance given by the West to the Soviet Union during the great famine of 1921: in their attempt to convince Soviet power of the generosity of the West and the superiority of the capitalist system, the sponsors of this food-aid programme in fact facilitated the systematic bleeding of the agricultural sector and the crushing of the peasantry (Ruffin, 1985). Emergency food aid, ostentatiously offered or refused, often conceals ulterior motives, as may be seen from many examples during the Cold War. Thus, although the aid arriving at Cambodian refugee camps on the Khmer-Thai border certainly saved many lives, it also helped to forge the unnatural alliance that led to the resurgence of the Khmer Rouge (Shawcross, 1984). Conversely, the politically motivated refusals by the international community in 1983 and 1984 to respond to the appeals launched by FAO and WFP for aid to Ethiopia, then suffering the effects of more than a year of catastrophic drought, led not only to a major disaster in humanitarian terms but also to the acceleration of forced population displacement programmes conducted under inhumane conditions. It took those BBC documentaries shown in November 1984 and again on Christmas Eve to make world public opinion aware

of the ongoing tragedy and at long last to elicit some reaction. But by then it was too late for a great many Ethiopians.

Food aid also came to be used as a structural tool of development policy. For political reasons, steps had to be taken to prevent the process of economic collapse in certain countries from culminating in "food riots", that last stage of geopolitical upheaval. The stability of "friendly" countries had to be secured, and the only real explanation for the thousands of tonnes of food aid poured into Somalia in the 1980s, despite the well-known scale of misappropriation by the administration (Samatar, 1991), was the need to ensure that the situation in Somalia, a neighbour of Mengistu's Ethiopia, did not deteriorate.

Food aid as a lever in negotiations

With the end of the Cold War and the resulting upheavals worldwide, strategies for the utilization of food aid have also changed. Food embargoes and refusals to finance nutrition programmes are increasingly used to put pressure on a party to a conflict, irrespective of the impact on the civilian population. When one realizes that the decision-makers are not the people who are going to suffer from the shortages thus created, one can well imagine that those decision-makers will allow the areas under their control to become the scene of infinite suffering before, for fear of an uprising, they yield to pressure. But at what human cost? Economic embargoes in the broad sense certainly form part of the arsenal of diplomatic pressure available to the United Nations Security Council and can also be used unilaterally by certain countries. Great care should be taken, however, not to go too far and above all to avoid subjecting vulnerable groups in the targeted countries to severe privation as the result of these political measures. In such situations, humanitarian agencies must retain every latitude to take independent and impartial action and to prevent a disaster. Current debates about Iraq, Serbia and Burundi demonstrate the complexity of these questions.

Starvation used as a weapon of war: A practice that is still all too frequent

It happens all too often that a state of famine is maintained, if not artificially created, by certain parties to a conflict. This generally has a twofold purpose. On the one hand, the object is to weaken the civilian population and the enemy's troops by hunger: from the siege of Troy in ancient Greece and those of Montségur and the Cathar castles in the Middle Ages to the sieges of Sarajevo and Kabul in 1994 and 1995, this

inhuman practice has continued to be an option in the military arsenal. On the other hand, the belligerents want to ensure that food-aid programmes will be set up in order to provide supplies for their own troops. The old Cambodian proverb "you make rice with water and make war with rice" is often still pertinent, even though the practice is formally prohibited by international humanitarian law.² But humanitarian law can only have an impact if the protagonists know, accept and respect it,³ and part of the strategy of combating starvation in wartime must therefore be to educate politicians, train the armed forces and inform the general public about the principles of international humanitarian law and of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. After all, these principles are the last bastion of those who are left without any say in conflict situations.

Food aid in crisis situations: Some comments on method

An abundance of operational angles

In emergency situations, food aid begins by saving lives. Then it assumes a preventive role, that of attenuating the economic repercussions of the crisis and reducing the risk of phenomena which are sometimes difficult to reverse (Mourey, 1989): mass population displacements, sale of livestock or means of production, consumption of seed, etc. For these reasons, food aid is indispensable. General (untargeted) distributions may take different forms, one of the most usual being the provision of **dry rations**, bulk supplies of maize, beans and oil distributed in different ways. Many of these programmes are large-scale operations requiring impressive logistic means. Although they long served as an outlet for the surpluses of certain rich countries (this is no longer the case in view of the low level of stocks worldwide), such programmes are costly because of the extensive logistics involved — airlifts, ships, all-terrain trucks, storage depots, etc. (WFP, 1995).

The **community kitchens** widely used in such contexts as Sarajevo and Abkhazia are designed to help people who cannot prepare their own

² Article 14 of Protocol II of 1977 states: "Starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited. It is therefore prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless, for that purpose, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works".

³ See Article 1 common to the four Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949.

meals (the elderly and those without access to cooking fuel), and may also be set up in situations where keeping food in homes might physically endanger the beneficiaries. This concern to protect civilians was at the basis of the kitchen programme set up by the ICRC and the National Red Crescent Society in Somalia.

There are also some more specifically targeted forms of food-aid distribution, such as **supplementary feeding systems** (additional to general distribution) for groups with special nutritional needs, such as pregnant women, growing children and convalescents. This kind of programme is widely used in camps where refugees or displaced people have settled for long periods. Since the basic rations often barely suffice to cover daily energy requirements (the WFP and UNHCR maintenance ration is 1,900 Kcal/day) in calcium, iron, vitamins and trace elements, deficiencies can appear in the medium and long term. On the basis of its experience, the ICRC prefers the option of increasing everybody's ration to a higher energy level (2,400 Kcal) to that of supplementary feeding, which entails individual targeting that can be dangerous and can have a limited impact because of redistribution of the supplementary ration within the family unit (Curdy, 1994). For it is still the family unit that remains at the centre of food security! (Mourey, 1995).

In the most serious cases of malnutrition (kwashiorkor, acute marasmus, etc.), **therapeutic feeding systems** have to be used. In these cases, the body begins to feed on its own living resources and to "cannibalize" itself, while trying to reduce energy consumption by slowing down its metabolism. Food intake and the return to normal must take place under medical supervision, particularly since the clinical effects of malnutrition are often complicated by infectious disease. Strategies for identifying needs, means of responding to those needs, the methods used in the field and the anthropometric criteria regarded as relevant vary greatly from one aid agency to another (MSF, 1995; WHO, 1983; UNICEF, 1992), and in these areas, as in so many others, there is no lack of controversy among the experts.

A rather special means of supplying food aid is used in certain European contexts; this involves the distribution of family or individual parcels containing a variety of foods — rice and oil, but also tinned cheese or meat. This form of aid, modelled directly on the relief sent to prisoners during the Second World War and the years of reconstruction (1945-1950), has demonstrated its merits as well as its limitations in crisis situations (particularly population movements) and in more chronic emergencies, especially those related to the breakdown of social systems

(pensions, aid for the elderly) which have accompanied the conflicts and political changes in Eastern Europe (the Balkans) and the countries of the former Soviet Union (ET Consultants, 1995).

Sacks of rice on the TV screen... but what is the effect on small farmers?

Over the past thirty years, emergency programmes have proliferated and food aid has become a regular feature of the media landscape. Some adverse effects of this kind of aid have also emerged, such as competition with local production which hampers agricultural rehabilitation, creation of dependence on free food, and so forth. "Against the grain", the title of a well-known OXFAM publication (Jackson, 1982), and "L'arme alimentaire" ("The food weapon", Bessis, 1985) can in no way be dismissed as fanciful views. Peasant farming has been destabilized in the long term by such programmes (Jackson). Food aid often arrives late, sometimes a whole agricultural season late, when the situation has improved and this type of assistance is no longer so badly needed. It nevertheless arrives in massive quantities and at low prices on the local markets, filling up warehouses and leaving local farmers with their produce on their hands. The countries of the Sahel were all too familiar with this situation during the great drought of 1974. Owing to a similar time-lag thousands of tonnes of food aid were poured into Somalia from the second quarter of 1993 to the end of 1994, when the real emergency phase was well and truly over and the farmers of the Juba and Shabelle basins were vainly trying to sell their produce. The most successful operations are all marked by the same sequence of events: an early and convincing alarm is sounded; food stocks already exist and no political obstacles are set up, either by the donors or by the country affected by the crisis; and, finally, the food-aid agency concerned manages either to withdraw soon enough to prevent these programmes from hampering the resumption of agriculture or to assume the role of a rehabilitation agency. Only rarely are all these conditions fulfilled.

Supervision and monitoring are vital

It is essential that food aid be perceived as purely humanitarian. The passage of convoys must be negotiated, and not imposed by force or blackmail — whence the importance of being accepted and recognized as a neutral intermediary, impartial and independent but also impervious to the influence of the warring parties. Only under these conditions is there any chance that the food will reach all the victims. Supervision of the aid

at the different stages of its delivery and distribution, to prevent its being used for unavowed purposes, is of primary importance. In one incident, no sooner had a food-aid agency's aircraft taken off from a remote little settlement in the heart of Africa, leaving sacks piled up at the edge of the airstrip without any supervision whatsoever, than some young soldiers slipped out of the surrounding bush, shouldered the sacks and set off back to the front lines! In cases where the supervision requirements stipulated in Article 23 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 are clearly not observed by humanitarian agencies, it is alas not surprising that aid is so often held up. Lastly, we should return to the concept of humanitarian agencies' responsibility first and foremost to the victims, but also to citizens all over the world who finance these programmes through their taxes and their donations.

The proverb of the fish and the net

Emergency food-aid programmes must give way as soon as possible to measures for rehabilitating local agricultural and economic activities and, if necessary, for providing them with support (instead of setting out to corner the local markets). The transition from the dynamics of emergency food aid to longer-term action is difficult. The necessary know-how, the type of dialogue conducted with the local population and the realities of the power games seem to be quite different — but are they really as different as all that? Faced with these problems and complexities, pure and simple withdrawal is the option often chosen by many so-called emergency humanitarian aid organizations. It is generally easier to leave than to change, and, moreover, the media attention focused on disasters and humanitarian action is such that organizations often follow the cameras, and hence the opportunities for obtaining funds. For some agencies, the need to be present in the field in order to maintain their own structures compels them to follow the fashion. They leave as quickly as they came, in the wake of the journalists, thus lengthening the list of forgotten conflicts, of corners of the earth where people slaughter each other and starve to death far away from the cameras...and from the humanitarian organizations.

And yet the phasing out of food-aid programmes should necessarily lead to their replacement by action to support agricultural production and to stimulate the economy. Such cases are still few and far between, although for over a decade emergency rehabilitation has constituted an integral part of the operational strategy at the ICRC in food crisis situations. Food aid too is a part of this strategy.

Emergency rehabilitation covers two specific areas. First of all, there is **support for local survival strategies** (Grunewald, 1993). The local population does not remain passive in an emergency, but develops mechanisms for survival and crisis management. The aim should therefore be to stimulate these mechanisms, and for this purpose a whole system of expertise has been established and a whole set of procedures devised and put into practice. The approaches of agronomists and nutritionists, combined with those of veterinarians, fishery experts and sanitary engineers, have served as a basis for integrated programmes to help the population regain a measure of self-sufficiency in food, despite the cannon's roar. Then there is the need to **smooth the passage from the emergency phase to that of post-conflict development**. This may, for example, entail providing help for the first groups of farmers who return to areas abandoned during the conflict. It also involves curtailing as far as possible the periods during which food aid is required, in order to avoid dependence, limit the extent to which aid becomes part of local survival strategies, and keep changes in nutritional practices to a minimum.

During the past four years, large-scale agricultural programmes in Somalia, Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sudan and Liberia, and veterinary and fishery operations in Somalia and the Sudan have led to the development of such activities in most of the major African ecosystems. At present, every single ICRC assessment team leaving for an area of Africa in serious food crisis comprises an agronomist. Since 1993, this policy has been extended to Europe, from the former Yugoslavia to the remnants of the former Soviet Union (Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, Nagorny Karabakh, Tajikistan), and into Asia with Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. The activities undertaken now take in the informal urban sector, particularly local crafts, and problems of urban and periurban agriculture: Kabul, Mogadishu, Sarajevo and the like have become pilot areas for encouraging urban survival strategies.

Environmental issues must also be taken into account. On the one hand, there are those related to the availability of firewood for cooking and the impact on ecosystems, especially forests, of the thousands of meals prepared daily in reception centres for displaced people. On the other hand, mechanisms are now being developed for preserving biodiversity in the midst of conflicts, through protection and utilization of local genetic resources, taking advantage of indigenous know-how for the propagation of traditional seeds, tubers and so forth. As mentioned above, food aid is often the "fuel" for these agricultural rehabilitation programmes, as it not only slows down the process of deterioration of the food production system but also enables it to recover. Coupled with an

input of agricultural supplies (seed, tools, tubers, etc.), food distributions carried out before the planting season, or in the form of "seed protection rations" (SPR: rations issued together with seed, to prevent the seed from being eaten in times of serious food shortages), or to tide the population over until the next harvest, are often indispensable. In the area around Baidoa, the epicentre of the famine in Somalia, this strategy turned the Bay and the Bakol green again in one rainy season.

Food aid and developmental contexts: What is the right approach?

Until the late 1980s, over 80% of food-aid resources were allocated to development activities. Although this percentage has declined sharply as a result of large-scale humanitarian emergencies, it still remains considerable, representing hundreds of thousands of tonnes of cereals, legumes and oleaginous produce every year. In development contexts, the principle is simple: food aid, as a partial substitute for money, is regarded as a means of investment in the collective productive capacity and social infrastructure. There are four main types of activity in this area: Food for Work; the establishment for regulatory purposes of reserves which are run down or reconstituted to support producers' prices; "monetization", or sale of food aid at more or less subsidized rates; and support for social programmes.

Myths and realities of Food for Work

The term "Food for Work" (FFW) is generally used when food aid, instead of being distributed free of charge, is used as payment for work designed to stimulate the construction or maintenance of collective infrastructure (irrigation networks, road repairs, etc.), or as part of a natural disaster prevention policy (anti-erosion barriers, terracing, reforestation, etc.).

Experience has shown that the conditions for the success or failure of such programmes are quite easy to identify, by means of a simple economic calculation based on the opportunities open to the available manpower. If food is scarce and therefore expensive, and if job opportunities are few and poorly paid, FFW becomes attractive. This is borne out by WFP's experience in certain countries suffering severe food shortages and that of the ICRC in stimulating local manufacture of agricultural tools in Afghanistan. As soon as the number of options increases or the daily wage rate in other sectors rises above that paid by the FFW project

(urban messengers paid in cash as against rural labourers paid in flour), interest in FFW wanes perceptibly. This perfectly logical law has been clearly demonstrated in certain OXFAM irrigation programmes in Cambodia and in many other FFW projects. In the course of the ICRC's agricultural tool manufacturing programme, the smiths first requested payment in food, then asked for cash payment, and then showed a renewed interest in flour, according to variations in cereal prices and in the regularity of supplies. Moreover, local workers sometimes have to choose between agricultural activities (tilling the soil, sowing, tending and harvesting crops) or non-agricultural work (house repairs, woodcutting, crafts, etc.) on the family farm on the one hand, and the possibility of FFW on the other. This makes the planning of certain FFW programmes simply impossible. Ultimately, when the wage differential between salaried jobs and FFW reaches a certain point, the launching of a FFW programme, however well justified, becomes completely unworkable. Here again, the list of failures is long: many are those who, having omitted to make the basic economic calculation, have come a cropper over splendid FFW programmes in which no one ever came to work. Remuneration in FFW projects must therefore be assessed with due regard for local wage levels and job opportunities.

An area in which FFW nevertheless remains important is that of the maintenance of traditional collective structures in systems where the wealth, particularly in the form of cereal stocks, accumulated by certain strata of society is partly redistributed in the course of such collective work. One example is the maintenance of the "karezes" or underground irrigation systems of Afghanistan. The water emirs in charge of the irrigation networks regularly redistributed to poor farmers part of the taxes and dues they collected in exchange for this maintenance work, during which the labourers were fed. When for various reasons, especially because of the war, society as a whole was drawn into a process of decapitalization, this system of collective work for the public good could no longer continue, as everyone was struggling for his own survival. This is clearly a case for FFW.

Then there are cases in which FFW is used as a subsidy for States or institutions which cannot pay their officials or employees. Such practices may perhaps be justified in certain conflict or immediate post-conflict situations where the economy is in virtually total collapse: no money, no food to be found in the markets, salaries far too low in relation to the cost of basic foodstuffs and so forth. Great care should nevertheless be taken not to perpetuate this kind of programme as an easy solution, for there are already some indications of the disastrous side-effects that might result.

Food aid and commodity price regulation

Programmes for price stabilization by means of food aid operate according to a fairly simple system: food is bought up in periods of surplus in order to avoid the collapse of prices for the producer, and stocks are released in times of scarcity to avoid a sharp rise in basic food prices and to limit the risk of social unrest — food riots — that often accompany such increases, particularly in urban environments. Although these programmes are satisfactory in theory, they nevertheless come up against a number of problems. They require scrupulous honesty on the part of the price-regulating body. The institutions responsible for such programmes — often the national cereals offices of the countries concerned — can be subjected to various pressures and their senior officials to a great deal of temptation. The cost of storage (buildings to be rented or properly maintained, stock-taking, regular fumigation where necessary, etc.), of releasing stocks and of replenishing reserves are by no means negligible. Nor are the technical aspects simple, involving as they do conservation of stocks in environments where insects, fungi and rodents are “aggressive”, the fixing and application of expiry dates, stock rotation mechanisms and so on. Europe gained wide experience of these problems with its surpluses of cereals and dairy products in the 1970s and 1980s. Moreover, these programmes are often hard hit by the economy measures suggested by the IMF and the World Bank (UNICEF, 1987): being based on the principle of State intervention on the market in order to regulate prices for both producers and consumers, the programmes run counter to the laws of the market economy and free competition and are therefore favourite targets of the Bretton Woods institutions.

The real problems in this sector often arise from the fact that stocks are built up using not local produce but cereals imported from the North. Although the second part of the equation (keeping prices down in times of food scarcity) can indeed be applied by means of these imports, the first part (providing support for rural economies) certainly cannot; and without much incentive to produce a surplus, farmers fall back on subsistence agriculture and no longer produce surpluses for trade. All the urban workers who could make a living by processing this local produce (Muchnik, 1981; Altersial, 1981) are also deprived of their livelihood, and the vicious circle of disruption of food security systems in towns is set in motion, while farmers are left with their unsold stocks on their hands. One of the best solutions involves a triangular programme within a given region. Food is purchased in areas or nearby countries with surpluses and is eventually used in areas with deficits. This represents a mixture of the two processes described above.

Monetization and creation of resources for development

The principle of monetization of aid is clear: the expectance of receiving free aid and the dependency syndrome must be prevented. This can be done through such pre-existing commercial systems as State outlets, national cereal offices, cooperatives, large-scale cereal traders, farmers' unions and so forth. This monetization is usually effected through the establishment of counterpart funds, as follows: instead of being distributed free of charge, the food aid is sold, and the proceeds are used to set up a fund for investment in social or productive projects. The fund may be managed jointly by the food-aid donor and an institution of the country where the operation takes place. Projects of this kind have been in existence for some time, but not long enough for there to be a proper global evaluation of their potential and their prospects. The difficulties involved in their implementation, however, are beginning to make themselves felt (Solagral, 1995).

Support for social programmes

Social programmes essentially target population groups which because of poverty and national underdevelopment may be denied access to sufficient food rations in both qualitative and quantitative terms: children in kindergartens and schools, pregnant women and nursing mothers, hospital patients, destitute elderly people without pensions or any other means of support (WFP, 1995). It may be observed that the need for these programmes, which often have a considerable impact on the individuals and families concerned, increases as countries follow the recommendations of the IMF and the World Bank. To reduce national deficits, it is easier to make cuts in "social" budgets (UNICEF, 1987) than in defence budgets (Petris, 1993). Vulnerable groups thus lose their only remaining "safety net". This analysis is at last beginning to gain recognition, as may be seen from recent discussions among the seven most highly industrialized countries (G7).

Some individual experiments: Collective granaries and seed banks

In many contexts, the traditional practices of keeping collective granaries and community seed stocks have disappeared, and yet these disaster-prevention mechanisms were vitally important and constituted one of the social bases of food security. This is an as yet unexplored sector for the investment of food aid. In the Sahel, under the regional auspices of the Sahel Club and the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel, and particularly through the efforts of such

non-governmental organizations as the Rural Development Research Group and the Green Africa consortium, "village granaries" and cereal banks have been set up. More recently, under the ICRC agricultural programme in Angola, experiments have been carried out using food aid to reconstitute seed stocks in the form of community seed banks (ICRC, 1995). Although these experiments seem to be generally successful, it is still too early to draw a final conclusion and to define the relevant procedures and strategies.

Conclusions: A wide variety of challenges

The aim must be to return to our humanitarian roots, and in particular to respect for international humanitarian law. For the ICRC, the only imaginable and ultimately effective form of humanitarian aid is that which envisages mankind in all its dignity and universality, a concept which applies equally to food aid when it is necessary. This calls for an ethical, professional and pragmatic approach to the primary objective of protecting and assisting the victims (ICRC, 1993). The task is by no means simple, although the considerable experience acquired has led to a significant improvement in the quality of services rendered to those who, one fine morning, suddenly lose everything, or who are obliged to flee their homes or to scrape a living amid war-scarred ruins. The fact still remains, however, that prevention is better than cure, and in many cases prevention is linked to respect for humanitarian law.

Programme quality must remain an ethical requirement. Food programmes must be based on a specific analysis of the victims' needs, taking possible medium-term repercussions into account, and not on a geopolitical appraisal of situations. It is also essential to go back to Hippocrates' initial aphorism: "First of all, avoid doing harm". When prompted by a generous impulse, we must avoid doing more harm than good by taking ill-considered action. Cost/effectiveness requirements must also be given due consideration, for the best programme is naturally the one which has the greatest impact at the least cost. Food aid must be brought out of its isolation and integrated in a broader concept of food security (Solagral, 1995). An approach which includes food aid in the process of recapitalization of family economies and support for agricultural production seems to be one of the most effective combinations for preventing potential nutritional disasters. Such multisectoral action makes it possible to take account of both the diversity of the victims' needs and the common characteristics of people everywhere. If the weather is cold, food aid will have little effect unless it is accompanied by distributions

of blankets! And if sanitary conditions are deplorable, the benefits of food aid will be greatly reduced by diarrhoea (Perrin, 1995). The need to protect the civilian population must also be borne in mind, both in analysing the situation and in seeking solutions. What should be done if famine results from the mining of agricultural land or from the looting of fields and granaries by soldiers? Should a food distribution operation be mounted if it will place the beneficiaries at greater risk? It must also be remembered that there is no such thing as an average victim or a standard situation. It is therefore essential to adapt to this heterogeneity and to devise working methods and ways of analysing all the ramifications involved, from the beginning of the emergency to the return to conditions propitious for development. A multidisciplinary procedure, combining the expertise of agronomists, nutritionists, sanitary engineers, doctors and nurses, has become indispensable. The complexity of current situations has led to increasingly complicated programmes, which in turn require strategies for follow-up and evaluation. We have to be able not only to shift the focus of ongoing programmes, but also to learn from them. This constant effort to improve is dictated by ethical considerations.

It has become essential to separate humanitarian action from media-oriented and political/military considerations. Humanitarian assistance in general and food aid in particular now forms part of the diplomatic arsenal of States, and is also fully integrated in their strategy of communication with public opinion in their own countries. Fund-raising efforts often lead the agencies concerned to seek the greatest possible media attention, but they must take great care not to be seduced by the siren song of easy financing (Broche, 1994; Emmanuelli, 1991). This trend already leaves too many victims in obscure corners of the planet where people are dying of hunger without anyone paying any attention, while elsewhere the humanitarian agencies are vying with one another for a share in a programme.

Food-aid convoys escorted by armoured vehicles have unfortunately become an all too common sight. Humanitarian aid delivered under the auspices of the military is liable to be associated with automatic rifles, and sooner or later these weapons may have to be fired. That will be the end of the neutrality and impartiality of aid and hence the end of access to the victims. It is therefore vitally important for military action and humanitarian aid to be placed under separate flags. Even though coordination between the various protagonists is necessary (ICRC, 1993), the humanitarian domain must nevertheless remain intact, free from all trace of army boots and tank tracks.

As a preventive measure and especially in areas at risk (for ecological, social or other reasons), food security must be strengthened at the family level and emergency stocks must be built up. Local, regional and world food stocks and their respective availability constitute one of the two major pillars of world food security, the other being the soundness and dynamism of the multitude of functioning food-growing systems and their capacity to produce surpluses. The collapse of the agricultural economies of the Eastern European countries, the fallow-land policy of the European Union, the combination of adverse weather conditions and agricultural policies in North America, the long-running crises in certain parts of Africa, the recent inclusion of China in the list of countries with structural deficiencies, and a series of disastrous typhoons and floods elsewhere in Asia (Thailand, Philippines, Viet Nam, Laos, etc.) had reduced world food stocks to a critical level by the end of 1995. The international community must react without delay by instituting a series of measures aimed at the reconstitution of these stocks, particularly through purchases from the countries of the South themselves. More important still, genuine policies of support for food-growing and food-security systems must be redeveloped, in particular through support for agronomic research directed towards the needs of peasant agriculture and its food-producing sectors (CNRS, 1986). Efforts to limit post-harvest losses at the peasant farm level should also be actively supported.

New working methods must be devised to allow the population to participate more closely in the assistance process. **There must be more “partners” and fewer “beneficiaries”.** At the other end of the chain, there are the victims who watch their human dignity melting away under the sun or freezing up in the cold as they stand in line for food distributions, and peasant farmers who see the storage depots overflowing with imported produce while they cannot sell their own crops. Although greater participation by the local population is an objective that has long been sought by development agencies, it has only recently been taken into account by those concerned with emergency aid (Anderson, 1989). The ICRC has gradually tried to adapt its working methods, particularly by promoting the assignment of responsibility to the population and its most respected leaders, which could greatly facilitate its action. Moreover, working in a transparent manner through traditional structures might enhance both the equity of distributions and the security of operations. Thus, whether in Somalia, Mozambique, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia or the former Soviet Union, new mechanisms for the distribution of emergency aid have been introduced and are being developed and streamlined. Similarly, the increasing importance assumed by programmes pro-

viding support for survival and agricultural rehabilitation strategies (often including a food-aid component) shows that efforts are being made to enable the victims to regain their capacity for action and reaction, instead of reducing them to the status of passive recipients of aid. A civilian population which bears the full brunt of a conflict or natural disaster or which is potentially at risk must play a greater part than ever before in maintaining its own food security within the strategies of external purveyors of aid (ICRC, 1994).

In conclusion, it may be noted that the news is not all bad. There are fortunately many emergency food-aid programmes which are well run, completed in time and followed by action designed to strengthen food security systems. And yet, although these programmes have saved millions of lives and the collapse of agrarian economies has been checked to some extent, it is, alas, impossible to claim that such success stories are in the majority.

The growing importance that is being attached to the concept of food security is significant. This issue, which goes far beyond mere food aid, is at last beginning to be taken into account with increasing frequency (Curtis, 1988; Chonchol, 1987). The choices made — imported or local cereals, food aid or assistance to agriculture — will shape the future (Sautier, 1989), but food aid may encounter considerable difficulties because of the global deficit situation that is developing. The step is short from “technical” to “media-political” targeting. But if they are allowed to become at best operations mounted for the media and at worst political fig leaves, these programmes could easily drift out of the humanitarian sphere. It is high time for them to return. What is at stake is the dignity of human beings, both of those who give and of those who, in sometimes humiliating circumstances, receive.

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