A Review of Food-Aid and Food-Assistance at the World Food Programme

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Introduction

The transition from food-aid to food-assistance developed gradually over the past decade and was influenced, in part, by changes occurring on the global landscape such as: climatic variability, increased protracted confrontations, the food price crisis of 2007/8, and continued urbanization across much of the emerging market economies, as well as aging populations. The aforementioned changes on the global landscape have contributed to greater instability and vulnerability among many emerging market economies, which, in turn, created a need for a new humanitarian architecture that included a broader set of program tools to address increased food insecurity.

This text will define food-aid for development and provide an abbreviated summary of the Food Aid Convention including a short description of the practices which have characterized food-aid at the World Food Programme (WFP). Furthermore, the text will analyze the factors that have contributed to the creation of the Food Assistance Convention and furnish a sampling of tools which are representative of food-assistance activities conducted by the WFP. Why the WFP? Barrett and Maxwell (2005) emphatically cite the WFP was “the world’s dominant multilateral food-aid organization, responsible for more than 95 percent of multilateral food-aid allocated and 30-40 percent of all food-aid worldwide” (p. 63). As the world’s former dominant multilateral food-aid organization, I decided the WFP would be a notable example to further study how it has transitioned to food-assistance.

Background

The WFP describes itself as the most significant humanitarian organization dedicated to combating global hunger, underscoring it has operations in circa 80 countries (World Food Programme, 2017f). To support its operational activities the WFP employs more than 14,000 individuals worldwide of whom an estimated 90% are assigned to country offices assisting food insecure people and monitoring the impact of its operations (World Food Programme, 2017f). Financial support for the WFP operations is derived entirely from voluntary donations, which exceeded US $5.9 billion in 2016 (World Food Programme, 2017f).

The WFP 2017-2021 strategic plan is a framework serving to guide the WFP’s operations, which is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals2 (World Food Programme, 2017e). Moreover, the strategic plan is linked to the WFP’s mission statement which is clearly defined in its general regulations. Concisely, “the

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1 Food insecurity can refer to people unable to meet their minimum dietary energy or food requirements. Distinction is drawn between long-term food insecurity (e.g. chronic) and short-term food insecurity (e.g. transitory).

2 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which expired at the end of 2015. The SDGs are officially known as “Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development.” The WFP specifically focusses on SDG2, Ending Hunger and SDG 17, Partnerships.
purposes of WFP are: (a) to use food aid to support economic and social development; (b) to meet refugee and other emergency and protracted relief food needs; and (c) to promote world food security in accordance with the recommendations of the United Nations (UN) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (World Food Programme, n.d. a, p. 1).”

From Food-Aid to Food-Assistance

Food-aid for Development Defined
The definition of food-aid for development is not straightforward, as a result of differing definitions of food-aid among countries (Clay, 2000). For example, cites Clay (2000), “a financial transfer or transfer of food in one country may count as food-aid while in another country the same transaction may be defined differently” (p. 1-4). Moreover, authors Murphy and McAfee (2005) have attempted to define food-aid for development and have employed three elements to define it, noting the terms food-aid and food-assistance are used interchangeably below.

- “Food-aid must cross at least one international boarder. Food assistance by a government or private agency to local citizens does not constitute food aid.”
- “Food-aid must be concessional, either provided free of cost or provided to the recipient at a cost lower than the commercial or market price of the food involved.”
- “Food-aid must either be in the form of actual food – known as direct transfers – or in the form of funds for goods to be exchanged for food” (Murphy and McAfee, 2005, p.1-9).

Despite the differing definitions of food-aid for development, noting there are numerous other definitions apart from those cited above, I shall, nonetheless, for this text revert to the aforementioned definition elaborated by Murphy and McAfee.

Food-aid at the World Food Programme
Prior to the commencement of humanitarian or emergency activities by the World Food Programme–vulnerability assessments were conducted to identify the most vulnerable people within a recipient country. The pertinent data collected from the assessments was, in turn, analyzed to determine the amount and type of intervention required to nourish the food insecure. Thereafter, depending on the intervention, the process of selection, acquisition and delivery of the identified food commodities to the recipient country began.

The implementation of humanitarian or emergency activities was typically carried out at WFP field offices supported by an array of programmatic and administrative functions. The architecture to address food insecurity during the dominant food-aid years was largely limited to the distribution of food commodities. A few examples of
WFP’s programme activities included: general food distribution, food for assets, mother and child health and nutrition in addition to other similar programs.

The Origin of the Food Assistance Convention
The origin of food-assistance can be traced to the first negotiated international treaty and the only legal agreement governing food-aid, the Food Aid Convention (FAC). The FAC was negotiated in 1967 and required “its member countries to ensure a minimum availability of food-aid to meet emergency requirements and development activities” (Clay, 2000, p. 2). In sum, the distribution of food commodities to recipient countries remained for decades as the dominant paradigm to address food insecurity\(^3\), as it is known today.

At the beginning of the 21st century, opponents of food-aid namely aid practitioners, academia, nongovernmental organizations (NGO’s) and UN agencies—exerted pressure on donors for an alternative to food aid. The opponents of food-aid were against its long lead times, the latency between the placement of an order of food commodities from a donor country and delivery to a recipient nation (Clapp, 2012). In addition, cites Clapp (2012), opponents were against the additional costs of shipping food commodities from one geographical area to another, when the same commodities were, in some cases, available within the same geographical region as the recipient nation of food aid.

In 2012 the Food Aid Convention treaty underwent a significant change with the emergence of a new treaty and terms, which was reflected in the amended name of the treaty, the Food Assistance Convention. The new treaty expanded the type of assistance allowed under the former treaty—namely limited to food and seeds—to include the use of new tools (e.g. cash-based vouchers). Proponents viewed the broader and seemingly more-effective tools as better suited in emergency and post-crisis recovery situations, given the provision for local and regional procurement, transfers directly to the hungry, and a focus on livelihoods\(^4\) during emergencies and post-crisis recovery situations (Clapp, 2012).

Changes in the Landscape of Humanitarian Assistance and Development

Increased Instability and Vulnerability
To assimilate the transition from food-aid to food-assistance, it is imperative to review some of the underlying factors that have contributed to the transition. In this section I will provide an overview of crises, encompassing natural and man-made, given the important role crises have had in shaping humanitarian and emergency assistance over the past decade. While the Food Assistance Convention has emerged

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\(^4\) According to the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), livelihoods refer to capabilities, assets and strategies that people use to make a living; that is to achieve food and income security through a variety of economic activities.
only a few years ago, the landscape surrounding natural and man-made crises, including protracted confrontations\textsuperscript{5}, has continuously evolved over the past decade. A sampling of the elements I refer to include:

- Climatic variability, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (n.d.), has and is expected to continue to exacerbate natural disasters while the number of protracted confrontations within a single country’s borders, and or between two or more countries, continue to increase.

- Migration from rural areas to urban centers continues to further challenge already stressed infrastructure throughout many of the emerging market economies, contributing to the instability of many of the emerging market economies, as does aging populations (Bhatta, 2010).

- According to the World Bank (2012), food prices have fallen after peaking during the food price crisis of 2007/8. However, despite lower food prices in 2013/4, they (food prices) are, nonetheless, subject to changes in energy costs, thereby contributing to instability.

The elements highlighted above have contributed to increased instability for many emerging market economies, which, in turn, have contributed, in varying degrees, to a presumed increase in the number of food insecure requiring assistance.

**Humanitarian Reform Process**

Against the backdrop of increased instability and vulnerability, numerous multilateral organizations involved with aid\textsuperscript{6} have implemented measures to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of aid in general and the aid they (multilateral organizations) administer. For example, the United Nations Humanitarian Reform process began in 2005 with the creation of the role of emergency relief coordinator, as part of the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) aimed at improving the effectiveness of humanitarian response (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, n.d.).

At approximately the same time as the IASC, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) was established by the UN General Assembly as an instrument created to provide timely humanitarian assistance to those affected by natural disasters and protracted clashes (UN Central Emergency Response Fund, n.d.). The CERF fund is comprised of a grant facility of $450 million dollars and a loan facility of $30 million dollars available to international aid agencies with the aim to provide funding for “rapid response” activities and “underfunded emergencies” (UN Central Emergency Response Fund, n.d.). Additionally, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

\textsuperscript{5} Protracted confrontations can be referred to as long-term hostile situations between opposing parties. An example may include two warring factions confined within a country’s boarder.

\textsuperscript{6} The usage of the term aid in this context encompasses humanitarian aid, emergency relief and development aid.
Development (OECD), working in parallel with the UN, has also taken initiative to render aid more effective. The OECD’s Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is responsible for the work on aid effectiveness. In 2003 the DAC hosted the Working Party on Aid Effectiveness, a high level forum whereby emerging market economies join multilateral and bilateral donors to work on improving aid effectiveness (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2016). The subsequent high-level forums on Aid Effectiveness (e.g. Paris, Accra and Busan) are a clear demonstration of DAC’s commitment to render aid more effective.

**Food-assistance at the World Food Programme**

**Awareness of Food-assistance**
The WFP has cited there is a lack of clarity among WFP staff and partners, at different levels, regarding the shift from food-aid to food-assistance (World Food Programme, 2012c). Additionally, the text cited “some of WFP’s staff and partners consider food assistance as a re-branding of work already taking place from 2008, while others viewed food assistance as closely linked to the Paris and Accra declarations” (World Food Programme, 2012c, p. iv). Furthermore, other WFP staff and partners “were unable to identify a specific element of food assistance apart from the shift to voucher or cash-based transfer programs” (World Food Programme, 2012c, p. iv).

**Cash-based Transfers**
Cash-based transfers are one of the principle program tools that emerged as a result of the transition from-food aid to food-assistance. Granting beneficiaries cash and/or vouchers during a humanitarian intervention allows beneficiaries, in part, to choose what food they want to eat, thereby contributing to overall greater human welfare as asserted by Sen (1999) in his "capability approach theory." Additionally, cites Clapp (2012), food assistance programs, such as cash-based transfers, can contribute to less market distortion effects than former food-aid programs in recipient countries.

A cash-based transfer intervention occurs only after a thorough analysis of local food markets within a recipient country to ascertain the capacity of the food markets to sustain a cash-based transfer program. Concisely, the majority of modality analyses are conducted jointly by the vulnerability analysis and mapping (VAM) unit at the WFP headquarters and with regional bureaus. Additionally, examples of publications produced by the VAM unit include: “The ALert for Price Spike”, “The Market Monitor” and various market assessments.

**Cash-based Transfers and Information Technology**
The WFP’s technology capabilities have been applied to the cash-based transfer programme in Lebanon among other locations, whereby the WFP, in partnership with other UN offices, has devised a method of combining different electronic wallets on one bank card for beneficiaries. In other words, instead of providing beneficiaries with different bankcards from various participating UN agencies,
Technology has allowed beneficiaries to have one bankcard with different wallets, representing funding from various UN agencies, contributing to greater efficiency, which UN and OECD reforms have been advocating.

**Logistics**

WFP’s logistics division has been challenged with the transition to food-assistance, as a significant number of recent recipient countries are land-locked, contributing to increased transportation and related costs. Examples include the Republic of South Sudan and the Central African Republic. However, while not all recipient countries may be land locked, in-land transport is often limited within countries with direct access to seaborne trade. For example, Sierra Leone despite its favorable direct access to seaborne trade, has posed many challenges to the WFP. Moreover, another example would be the countries constituting the EBOLA crisis zone.

The innovation of tools or instruments employed by the logistics division has improved notably over the past decade. Examples include: bar coding and a commodity checking system, which provide real-time location of commodities and their expiration date. Knowing the expiration date of commodities allows the logistics division to mobilize commodities approaching expiration prior to those expiring at a later time. This innovation has contributed dramatically to reducing the storage and destruction costs associated with un-used and expired commodities.

Moreover, new food commodities have emerged as part of the WFP’s food basket, as a result, in part, of the transition to food-assistance, and these foods are referred to as “special nutritious food.” The share of special nutritious food utilized in the WFP’s interventions has been increasing in recent years, and presents its share of challenges, as these food items are more sensitive to the conditions of transport and shelf life. The John Hopkins and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (n.d.) assert the management of food-assistance logistics, targeting and the equitable distribution of an adequate general food ration, is essential for affected populations to obtain adequate food intakes. The introduction of special nutritious foods has, in part, contributed to the demand for additional tools, such as the logistics execution support system (LESS), to manage the WFP’s food resources and less sophisticated management tools such as dashboards to ensure a timely delivery of food commodities to beneficiaries.

**Nutrition**

Nutrition is cited consistently throughout the past decade in the WFP’s annual performance reports, as nutrition has been a top priority and is aligned with the WFP’s strategic objective “saving lives.” In 2008 and in 2013 the landmark series “maternal and child undernutrition”, published by the Lancet medical journal, provided empirical evidence in terms of the critical function nutrition has in
development and the achievement of the millennium development goals. The Lancet (2008a) underscored undernutrition commences prior to birth and to reverse undernutrition, efforts must focus on pregnant, lactating women and children under the age of two years. Furthermore, the publication cited infants of two years and under represent the window of opportunity to reverse some of the damage of undernutrition (Lancet, 2008a). Subsequent to the publication of the first Lancet article, the WFP revisited its vision for nutrition and published its nutrition policy framework (World Food Programme, 2012d). The aim of the new policy framework was to refocus the WFP’s nutrition-related priorities towards pregnant, lactating women as well as children up to the age of two years (World Food Programme, 2012d).

The Lancet (2013b) re-evaluated the empirical evidence presented previously and identified areas where nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive interventions can have the largest impact. Furthermore, the 2013 publication emphasized the importance of interventions during adolescence and targeting interventions during the first 1,000 days, which decisively affect child nutrition.

The underpinnings of nutrition and the linkages to development have contributed to the creation of the global movement “Scaling-Up-Nutrition” (SUN), which is comprised of donors, civil society, the UN and the private sector committed to improving nutrition in a collective effort (Scaling-Up-Nutrition, 2015b). According to Scaling-Un-Nutrition (2010a), its partners are determined to provide a robust support to ensure member countries are developing policies and implementing programs with shared nutrition goals (e.g. focus on empowering women) and are mobilizing resources to scale up nutrition.

As a partner of SUN, the WFP focuses its attention primarily on the 4 areas indicated below, whereby the WFP’s nutrition specific contribution can be most impactful (World Food Programme, n.d. b).

- Interventions and activities that treat moderate acute malnutrition;
- Making available and accessible good quality nutritious complimentary foods for children 6-24 months old;
- Ensuring nutrition and food support for women, especially during the last trimester of pregnancy;

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7 The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have expired at the end of 2015 and have been replaced with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), known officially as “Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development.”

8 Nutrition-specific interventions refer to interventions that address the immediate determinants or fetal and child nutrition and development (e.g. adequate food and nutrition intake, parenting practices, feeding etc.).

9 Nutrition-sensitive interventions refer to interventions that address the underlying determinants of fetal and child nutrition and development (e.g. food security, adequate caregiving resources and access to health services etc.).
• Addressing micronutrient deficiencies, particularly among adolescent girls;

Notwithstanding the above, the nutrition branch at the WFP contributes to the development of policies which seek to raise awareness of the intricacies of the role of nutrition in humanitarian and emergency interventions. Additionally, the nutrition branch ensures the WFP's nutrition-specific and nutrition-sensitive policies and programmes are being implemented according to the WFP’s guidelines. Furthermore, the nutrition branch supports the coordination of WFP’s nutrition-related interventions among its partners and recipient governments.

**Conclusion**

With no claim to completeness, I have carefully reviewed a fairly wide cross-section of the published literature on food-aid and food-assistance. Additionally, I have drawn a distinction between the activities conducted by the WFP under the former food-aid paradigm and the current food-assistance paradigm. Moreover, I have provided illustrations, employed by the WFP, which exemplify programme tools emanating from both the food-aid and the food-assistance paradigm. Against this backdrop, I have presented a sampling of factors which have professedly contributed to reshaping the landscape of humanitarian assistance and development. The limited sampling of factors I refer to include: climatic variability, increased migration to urban areas, fluctuating food prices and aging populations. Moreover, I hold the viewpoint these factors have contributed to further heightening instability and vulnerability of many emerging market economies which, in turn, have brought about, in part, the transition from the food-aid paradigm to one of food-assistance.

Related to the transition from food-aid to food-assistance, I wish to call attention that the use of cash-based transfers are, often, more cost-effective to implement than alternatives offered under food-aid. Furthermore, food-assistance activities tend to improve the traceability of resources, while allowing recipients to choose what to spend their money on. Moreover, the use of cash-based programmes contributes to improving livelihoods by sourcing agricultural products grown locally which, in turn, assists in generating income, contributing to improving livelihoods and reducing rural poverty.
Literature Consulted


