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Programme
Alimentaire
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Programa
Mundial
de Alimentos

**Executive Board
First Regular Session**

Rome, 31 January–2 February 2005

POLICY ISSUES

Agenda item 4

For approval

E

Distribution: GENERAL

WFP/EB.1/2005/4-A/Rev.1

4 February 2005

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

DEFINITION OF EMERGENCIES



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This document is submitted for approval by the Executive Board.

The Secretariat invites members of the Board who may have questions of a technical nature with regard to this document to contact the WFP staff focal points indicated below, preferably well in advance of the Board's meeting.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WFP's existing definition of emergencies dates from 1970 and was last reviewed in 1986. This paper reviews the WFP definition as well as definitions of emergencies used by other humanitarian agencies and donors. It concludes that the definition continues to set the appropriate general framework for WFP's emergency work, with some modifications to reflect changes and trends in the global humanitarian environment.

DRAFT DECISION*

The Board endorses the conclusions of document WFP/EB.1/2005/4-A/Rev.1. In accordance with decision 2002/EB.A/4, it requests the Secretariat to add the following updated definition of emergencies to the "Consolidated Framework of WFP Policies" (WFP/EB.3/2004/4-F):

"For purposes of WFP emergency projects, emergencies are defined as urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event or series of events has occurred which causes human suffering or imminently threatens human lives or livelihoods and which the government concerned has not the means to remedy; and it is a demonstrably abnormal event or series of events which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale.

The event or series of events may comprise one or a combination of the following:

- a) sudden calamities such as earthquakes, floods, locust infestations and similar unforeseen disasters;
- b) human-made emergencies resulting in an influx of refugees or the internal displacement of populations or in the suffering of otherwise affected populations;
- c) food scarcity conditions owing to slow-onset events such as drought, crop failures, pests, and diseases that result in an erosion of communities and vulnerable populations' capacity to meet their food needs;
- d) severe food access or availability conditions resulting from sudden economic shocks, market failure, or economic collapse — and that result in an erosion of communities' and vulnerable populations' capacity to meet their food needs; and
- e) a complex emergency for which the Government of the affected country or the Secretary-General of the United Nations has requested the support of WFP.

WFP's emergency interventions will continue to be based on assessed needs, also taking into account any other considerations or criteria that may be decided upon by the Executive Board consistent with the organization's rules, regulations and mandate."

* This is a draft decision. For the final decision adopted by the Board, please refer to the Decisions and Recommendations document issued at the end of the session.



PURPOSE OF THE PAPER AND APPROACH

1. WFP's existing definition of emergencies dates from 1970 and was last reviewed in 1986. The purpose of this paper is to determine the continuing appropriateness of the definition in the light of WFP's operational experience and in the light of evolving international thinking on the nature of emergencies.
2. This paper concludes that the existing definition, with minor adjustments, remains largely valid. What has evolved substantially over the past decades is the set of tools used by WFP to identify vulnerable people and determine the most appropriate food-aid intervention. This improved knowledge, especially in the areas of early warning, disaster preparedness, vulnerability analysis, nutritional analysis and emergency needs assessment (ENA) methodology, serves as the basis on which WFP decides whether or not to respond to emergencies. The modifications to the existing definition incorporate more recent thinking on types of emergencies and their causes. The new definition maintains flexibility for the Executive Director to respond to urgent human food needs in diverse and unpredictable situations.
3. The conclusions are derived from a review of WFP's current definition of emergencies, examined in the light of more recently approved WFP policies and operational practices. The paper also reviews the definitions applied by the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donor agencies to determine whether the WFP definition of emergencies is in line with those of its major partners and with international thinking.

WFP'S CURRENT DEFINITION OF EMERGENCIES

4. In 1970, the Inter-Governmental Committee (IGC) decided that:

“... for the purposes of WFP emergency projects, emergencies are defined as urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event has occurred which causes human suffering or loss of livestock and which the government concerned has not the means to remedy; and it is a demonstrably abnormal event which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale.”¹
5. The footnote to the definition identifies three types of emergencies:

“(a) sudden calamities such as earthquakes, floods, locust infestations and similar unforeseen disasters;

(b) man-made emergencies like an influx of refugees; and

(c) food scarcity conditions owing to drought, crop failures, pests and diseases.”²
6. Though not part of the definition itself, WFP practice and approved policies have confirmed that a WFP response would normally be permitted only when the provision of food aid is an appropriate remedy. Member States of the United Nations or members of any specialized agency or of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) are eligible to submit requests for emergency assistance. WFP may in addition provide emergency

¹ WFP/IGC: 17/5 Rev. 1, “Food aid and related issues during the second development decade”, para. 78, and the report of the Seventeenth Session of the ICG (WFP/IGC: 17/16, para 22).

² These are commonly referred to today as slow-onset emergencies. In 1986 the CFA clarified this category of emergency as “an erosion of the capacity of families to acquire enough food for survival”. WFP/CFA: 21/10 Add.1, “Criteria for the provision of food aid”.



food aid and associated non-food items and logistics support at the request of the Secretary-General.³ In addition to meeting food needs in emergency situations, WFP may also assist in the coordination of aid from all sources in order to achieve the best possible results.⁴

7. In 1986, the Committee on Food Aid Policies and Programmes (CFA) endorsed the definition and approved broad criteria for the release of emergency resources. The basic principles for WFP response are (i) that famine is unacceptable, (ii) that the poorest countries should receive priority attention, though gross national product (GNP) alone should not be the measure of a country's capacity to respond, (iii) that interventions should be rapid and not subject to excessive bureaucratic formalities and prescriptive criteria, and (iv) that assistance should be temporary.⁵

OTHER DEFINITIONS OF EMERGENCIES

8. Definitions of emergencies used by other agencies, partners, donors and academics reveal four broad commonalities: (i) they are general; (ii) they are usually broken down into three basic types of emergencies, corresponding to sudden natural disasters, slow-onset emergencies and political crises that usually involve population displacement; (iii) they recognize that many emergencies evolve from a process or series of events rather than from a single defining event, and therefore their time-frame, both start and finish, is fluid; and (iv) they call for flexibility and judgement based on situation-specific factors.⁶
9. Other agencies and donors avoid precise quantifications of what constitutes an emergency; particular types of resources or interventions are generally not linked to specific definitions. The definitions typically use subjective terms that refer to an "extraordinary situation" (UNDP) or an "exceptional and widespread threat" (OXFAM) that affect a "large number of people or a very large percentage of a population" (IASC). Emergency is characterized as requiring "exceptional measures" (UNHCR) or "extraordinary action" (UNICEF). There is consensus that an event is an emergency or requires an emergency response only when it "overwhelms the normal coping capacities of the affected people and society" (UNICEF). The Sphere project definition adds to emergencies the dimension of a threat to "life with dignity".
10. Broadly speaking, the definitions distinguish between three main types of emergencies. In UNICEF's terms, these are: (i) sudden-disaster emergencies, (ii) slow-onset

³ General Regulations, art. IX.

⁴ WFP/IGC: 5/17, "Report of the Fifth session of the United Nations/FAO Intergovernmental Committee of the World Food Programme".

⁵ WFP/CFA: 21/10 Add.1.

⁶ The review included examination of the definitions and guidance material of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) – disaster, crisis and emergency, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the Department for International Development (DFID), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)/Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – non-complex and complex, the European Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the Sphere project, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), *Action contre la faim* (ACF), Action by Churches Together (ACT), Caritas, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), the Norwegian Refugee Committee (NRC), the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam), the Save the Children Fund (SCF)/UK, World Vision International (WVI) and academia.



emergencies and (iii) complex conflict-related emergencies. UNDP refers to natural disasters, human-made disasters (not always conflict-related), and complex or crisis emergencies. ACT refers to “natural”, “human-made” and “complex” emergencies. One important unifying thread in these types is the recognition of “complex” as being a category of its own, characterized by intense political considerations at the root of the emergency and during the provision of assistance.

11. Another common feature of many emergency definitions is the notion that they can emerge from a series of events that test livelihoods and gradually break down coping capacities. SCF/UK points to a number of typical indicators, one or a series of escalating “crisis events”, that might signal the arrival of an emergency situation. Similarly, UNDP notes that “events and processes which can cause disasters do not always do so, and disasters do not always result in emergencies.”
12. The idea of an emergency being synonymous with an “imminent” crisis or with a “threat”, as opposed to the moment of acute crisis, is widespread. We do not wait for a famine to occur or to be declared to react; rather, we act to avert the famine. This leads to the need to act early to avoid the acute emergency itself and to protect or restore livelihoods as part of the emergency response.⁷
13. None of the reviewed definitions of emergencies define when an emergency should be considered over. The recent work of the UNDG/Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs (ECHA) Working Group on Transition Issues underlines the need for flexibility in determining when a post-conflict crisis is finished.⁸ WFP’s policy paper “Exiting Emergencies” (WFP/EB.1/2005/4-B) suggests possible triggers for the end of emergency assistance or for its transition to longer-term programming.
14. All the definitions of “emergency” that were studied acknowledge the role of judgement based on situation-specific factors in deciding whether a situation qualifies as an emergency or not – or, more important, whether it qualifies for emergency assistance. For example, ECHO’s continuing work on entry-strategy criteria attempts to identify quantifiable triggers for entry such as the percentage of a population affected, but acknowledges that the decision must draw heavily on the “opinions and information” of its field experts and on “the judgement of desk officers.”⁹

WHY ADJUST THE DEFINITION

15. The premise of the general definitions of emergencies used by WFP and its partner humanitarian agencies is that over-restrictive formulas are insensitive to the uniqueness of each emergency and could potentially impose bureaucratic delays on quick response. The definition must be complemented by a rapid and professional assessment of the usefulness of emergency food assistance based on a variety of situation-specific factors. The essential information required by WFP for determining whether the effects of an event or series of events on a population might require extraordinary food resources comes from two basic

⁷ The DFID *Glossary of development terms and abbreviations*, for example, identifies disaster preparedness as one type of emergency aid. ECHO identifies “preparedness for risks of natural disasters” as a cause for intervention. *ECHO Entry Strategy*, ECHO Working Paper, Revised May 2003.

⁸ “For the UN, transition refers to the period in a crisis when external assistance is most crucial in supporting or underpinning still fragile peace processes by helping to create the conditions for political stability, security, justice and social equity”. Report of the UNDG/ECHA Working Group on Transition Issues, 2004.

⁹ ECHO, 2003.



areas: (i) early warning and emergency preparedness, including baseline vulnerability analyses, and (ii) ENA, which includes analysis of the nutritional situation and of the extent to which food scarcity for vulnerable populations is a result of lack of availability and/or a lack of access.

16. WFP's existing definition of emergencies provides the general contextual guidance for decisions to launch an emergency operation (EMOP). To the extent possible, the definition should reflect existing challenges and current practices. Specifically, the definition should explicitly recognize (i) livelihood risk as an integral part of emergencies; (ii) the acceptance of "complex emergency" as a category of its own; and (iii) the role of needs assessment.

Livelihoods and Structural vs. Transitory Hunger

17. WFP's use of emergency resources to protect and save livelihoods is a long-standing policy and operational practice. The 1986 policy criteria for the release of emergency resources describe conditions under slow-onset or livelihood-threatening emergencies that warrant the use of emergency resources.¹⁰ The policy on Food Aid and Livelihoods in Emergencies (2003) confirms that WFP will implement emergency programmes that save lives *and* livelihoods.¹¹ WFP's Humanitarian Principles state that WFP will provide humanitarian assistance "in ways that support livelihoods".¹² The livelihoods element of emergencies acknowledges that a process of events rather than a single antecedent event can lead to erosion of families' capacity to acquire enough food for survival and that early assistance is sometimes needed to avoid irreversible loss of capacity.
18. One risk of trying to protect livelihoods through emergency responses is that food resources meant to address a shock or series of shocks can naturally gravitate towards addressing situations of chronic food insecurity, especially because communities that are already chronically food-insecure are particularly vulnerable to shocks. WFP's policy is that chronic situations should be addressed with longer-term development programmes, though distinguishing between chronic and transitory needs in a crisis is a major challenge for ENA.¹³ The recognition that so many "chronic" emergencies, such as those in Ethiopia or the Sudan, tended to merge relief, recovery and development and required a longer-term development perspective was one factor in the establishment of the protracted relief and recovery operation (PRRO) category, precisely in order to have an instrument that favours transition over the use of short-term emergency responses.

WFP Emergencies and HIV/AIDS

19. The onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic has radically changed the world's emergency landscape over the past 20 years. WFP has made addressing the humanitarian catastrophe of HIV/AIDS in much of the developing world a cornerstone of its operational reality. The

¹⁰ WFP/CFA: 21/10 Add.1. Though "livelihoods", a more common term today than 20 years ago, is not referred to directly, the policy guidance confirms the appropriateness of using emergency food aid in slow onset emergency situations to "contribute to long-term improvement in household food security", "permit(s) families to invest... in (their) future as well as preserving their lives", and "to contribute to a reduction in the future vulnerability of people to famine". WFP's recent policy, "Food Aid and Livelihoods in Emergencies: Strategies for WFP" (WFP/EB.A/2003/5-A), forms the basis for the use of WFP emergency food resources for livelihood protection and recovery.

¹¹ WFP/EB.A/2003/5-A.

¹² "Humanitarian Principles" (WFP/EB.1/2004/4-C).

¹³ "Emergency Needs Assessment" (WFP/EB.1/2004/4-A).



crisis is clearly a global disaster; high prevalence rates in poor countries are exacerbating food emergencies as well as chronic hunger among the poorest, most obviously in southern Africa. It is clear, however, that HIV/AIDS requires a longer-term response than an EMOP. Because it combines some features of a slow-onset emergency with the certainty of the need for a longer-term response, HIV/AIDS may be considered by WFP as the basis for a PRRO when HIV/AIDS threatens food security and influences mortality in ways similar to other disasters.¹⁴

Complex Emergencies

20. Until the late 1980s, emergencies were most often viewed as natural disasters and only to a lesser extent as human-made crises that might result in the displacement of vulnerable people. With the proliferation of post-cold war civil conflicts, this perception changed. Internal conflicts, often exacerbated by natural disasters, resulted in large numbers of civilian victims. These situations generated enormous humanitarian needs, especially for internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees. As complex emergencies evolve towards a political settlement and peace, they can also include humanitarian needs among combatants who are being demobilized. The concept of “complex emergencies” continued to evolve and expand in the turbulent aftermath of the cold war. Civil conflict, lack of authority and security, flagrant violations of human rights, displacement, disruption of infrastructure and economic systems and high levels of food insecurity are common characteristics of complex emergencies.¹⁵ Conflict may be the most direct cause of the complex emergency, but these crises are often further exacerbated by a multitude of other factors such as chronic food insecurity, disease, economic collapse, high external debt and environmental degradation.
21. In 1994, IASC agreed to the following definition of “complex emergencies”:
 “a humanitarian crisis in a country, region, or society where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing UN country programme.”¹⁶

Food Insecurity in Emergencies: Livestock vs. Livelihoods

22. The 1970 definition of emergencies reflects a somewhat different world from the reality of WFP’s emergency work today. In just a few years in the 1990s, WFP shifted from mostly development work to allocating about 80 percent of its operational expenditures to emergencies and protracted crises. The nature of its emergency responses has also shifted increasingly to conflict and post-conflict situations as well as to slow-onset and sudden economic crises, as in eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Indonesia. At the same time, WFP and other humanitarian actors have broadened their understanding of the importance of livelihoods in emergencies, moving considerably beyond the 1970 definition that singles out “loss of livestock” as a predominant signal that livelihoods may be imperilled. Today we do not accept “loss of livestock” on its own as a determining factor in erosion of livelihoods and human suffering, and it may well be less of a determining factor than HIV/AIDS or economic collapse, for example. Loss or

¹⁴ WFP/EB.1/2003/4-B.

¹⁵ UNICEF. 1999. *Humanitarian Principles Training: A Child Rights Protection Approach to Complex Emergencies*. WFP. 1999. *Recurring Challenges in the Provision of Food Assistance in Complex Emergencies: The Problems and Dilemmas faced by WFP and its Partners*. Rome, WFP Office of Evaluation.

¹⁶ IASC, 10th meeting, December 1994.



divestment of assets are major factors influencing vulnerability; similarly, technical or biological disasters might cause or contribute to an emergency. A modified definition that embraces a broader notion of livelihoods and that acknowledges conflict and political strife as typical of WFP's working environment would better reflect WFP's emergency world today.

RECOMMENDATIONS

23. WFP's long-standing definition of emergencies continues to set the appropriate general framework for its emergency work and is in line with the definitions used by its main humanitarian partners. This defining framework, combined with existing policy criteria for the use of WFP emergency resources, strikes a balance between allowing flexibility to respond quickly to varying crisis situations and providing accountability to donors for the allocation of emergency food aid. With some modifications, the existing definition of emergencies could better reflect changes and trends in the global humanitarian environment and in long-standing WFP policies and practices in emergencies.

24. Based on the discussion above, the following modified definition of emergencies for WFP is proposed. Changes to the existing definition are highlighted in bold:

For purposes of WFP emergency projects, emergencies are defined as urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event *or series of events* has occurred which causes human suffering *or imminently threatens human lives or livelihoods* and which the government concerned has not the means to remedy; and it is a demonstrably abnormal event *or series of events* which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale.

25. *The event or series of events may comprise one or a combination of the following:*

- a) sudden calamities such as earthquakes, floods, locust infestations and similar unforeseen disasters;
- b) *human-made emergencies resulting in an influx of refugees or the internal displacement of populations or in the suffering of otherwise affected populations;*
- c) food scarcity conditions owing to slow-onset events such as drought, crop failures, pests, and diseases that result in an erosion of *communities and vulnerable populations' capacity to meet their food needs;*
- d) *severe food access or availability conditions resulting from sudden economic shocks, market failure, or economic collapse — and that result in an erosion of communities' and vulnerable populations' capacity to meet their food needs; and*
- e) *a complex emergency for which the Government of the affected country or the Secretary-General of the United Nations has requested the support of WFP.*

26. *WFP's emergency interventions will continue to be based on assessed needs, also taking into account any other considerations or criteria that may be decided upon by the Executive Board consistent with the organization's rules, regulations and mandate.*



ACRONYMS USED IN THE DOCUMENT

ACF	<i>Action contre la faim</i>
ACT	Action by Churches Together
CFA	Committee on Food Aid Policies and Programmes
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DFID	Department for International Development
ECHA	Executive Committee on Humanitarian Affairs
EMOP	emergency operations
ENA	emergency needs assessment
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GNP	gross national product
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	internally displaced people
IGC	Inter-Governmental Committee
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Committee
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OFDA	Office of United States Foreign Disaster Assistance
Oxfam	Oxford Committee for Famine Relief
PRRO	protracted relief and recovery operation
SCF	Save the Children Fund (UK)
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WHO	World Health Organization
WVI	World Vision International

