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INTERIM STUDY ON WFP'S NEW CAPACITIES IN RESPONDING TO THE GREAT LAKES CRISIS

ABSTRACT

WFP's initial response to the humanitarian refugee crisis in Rwanda in mid-1994 was given urgent priority. Although conceived as a regional project, the operation was organized along traditional lines. However, over the following two years, WFP and UNHCR initiated joint work plans to enhance coordination in the field. WFP martialled and committed to the Great Lakes operation an array of innovative technologies and systems in such areas as radio data communications, and computerized pipeline management and commodity tracking.

These innovations, joint plans and procedures have enhanced the ability of WFP and the United Nations system to respond quickly and effectively to the humanitarian needs created by conflict and rapidly evolving political crises, and to cope with the mass population movements often accompanying them.

Following the multi-donor evaluation of the early stages (1994-95) of the Great Lakes operation, published in March 1996, and the "Desk Evaluation of the Rwanda-Burundi Emergency Operation", presented to the Executive Board in October 1996, this interim study provides an overview of WFP's technical and systems' innovations, and the new arrangements for operational coordination with major United Nations implementing partners.

As a next step, WFP has agreed with UNHCR and UNICEF to undertake a joint "lessons learned" exercise in the near future. The purpose of this exercise is to examine and appraise the effectiveness of the Great Lakes emergency operation, and in particular the modalities of field coordination among the three agencies. The report of this joint effort will be presented to the Board in early 1998, and will also be used as input for a broader study on the Great Lakes operation, to be commissioned in the same time frame by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC).

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BACKGROUND

1. The explosion of ethnic violence in Rwanda in April-June 1994 immediately created a regional crisis, sending over 750,000 frightened refugees into all four countries with a common border (Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and Zaire) in a matter of days. Many more - over two million - were internally displaced and also needed humanitarian assistance.
2. In the months that followed, as the massacres gelled into a civil war, and the victims became the victors, more people were internally displaced in Rwanda, or opted to cross the nearest border, swelling the numbers of refugees in neighbouring countries to over two million in an astonishingly short time.
3. WFP's initial response was structured in a more or less traditional fashion. A Great Lakes Task Force was established in Rome, chaired by the Regional Manager of the East Africa Bureau. Individual appeals were issued by country, and were grouped together for the purposes of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) Flash Appeal issued in late April, and the subsequent regular Consolidated Appeal emanated in July. For WFP, these measures were not dissimilar to those taken in the early stages of the Liberian regional crisis in 1990 or even the Sudano-Sahalien drought in 1985.

NEW CAPACITIES, DIFFERENT ARRANGEMENTS

4. Early on, however, there were signs that the Great Lakes emergency operation (EMOP) would be a turning point for the Programme. In August 1994, a Transport Coordination Unit (TCU) was set up (initially) in Kigali to coordinate overland transport region-wide. Steps were taken at the end of 1994 to standardize the form and content of statistical reports coming from country offices in the region.
5. The first regional EMOP was initiated in January 1995. A regional statistical database for pipeline management was established by the Africa Bureau in Rome, providing information about food resourced, procured and shipped "upstream" from the region. An inter-agency telecommunications network (AFRINET) was established, which permitted electronic message mail and file transfers at most field sites using high-frequency radio modems, and linked this network to points outside the region via the Internet.
6. While the system was being improved, however, in the early part of the year the situation on the ground in the region was deteriorating rapidly. The Bureau's subsequent progress report described the problem as follows:

“Although 1995 requirements had been communicated to the donor community throughout the latter part of 1994, food contributions were slow in being confirmed, and by February the Regional Emergency was confronted with a serious food availability crisis. A significant shortage of commodities available on commercial markets in the region compounded this problem, leaving WFP facing lead-times of two to three months needed to bring food from international markets, such as China, but without confirmed contributions to fund procurement.”



7. In March, WFP and UNHCR issued a joint communiqué estimating the funding shortfall for the remainder of the year at 230 million dollars¹. Inevitably, rations had to be reduced for refugees in Tanzania and much of Eastern Zaire, and security incidents were reported in the affected camps. The situation was exacerbated in April when Rwanda closed its border with Zaire for food shipments to Zaire, and escalating violence in Burundi sent an additional 18,000 refugees into Uvira, Zaire.
8. However, as the pattern of mini-crisis and food shortages in the Great Lakes operation became more and more apparent around mid-year, WFP and several major donors came to the same conclusion: it would be prudent to create buffer stocks in the region, particularly cereals, for use in short-term responses to the outbursts of violence and population movements.
9. The Transport and Logistics Division (OTL) in Rome customized a computerized Commodity Tracking System (CTS), which had been previously used in Mozambique, and installed it in the region in August 1995 as an integral part of the TCU. From then onwards, information about commodity flows “downstream” (i.e., within the region) became progressively more available in “real time” at work stations throughout the region.
10. By mid-1996, the Great Lakes operation was one of the largest - and with all its innovations certainly the most sophisticated - emergency programme ever launched by WFP. In two important respects, however, it was still very much like its predecessors:
 - a) local coordination between WFP and UNHCR, the two major United Nations implementing agencies, was an ad hoc process which, if not conflictive, was certainly awkward; and
 - b) as was the case for its sister agencies, WFP’s essential operational decisions were still taken at headquarters.

This situation was about to change, as described below.

BRINGING THE WFP/UNHCR MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU) TO GOMA

11. The first basic agreement on cooperation between the two main players of the United Nations emergency assistance system was negotiated in 1990-91 and signed in 1992. At the beginning of the Great Lakes operation, a January 1994 revision of the original agreement was in effect. This covered, *inter alia*, planning and needs assessment, food mobilization and milling, food delivery and distribution, resourcing, monitoring and reporting, and coordination.
12. The sections on coordination included pledges that the two agencies would:
 - a) exchange information at the field level;
 - b) establish food aid coordinating mechanisms in the field;
 - c) collaborate on public information;
 - d) share information on the development of emergency response capacities; and
 - e) undertake joint training courses and evaluations.

¹ All monetary values are expressed in United States dollars, unless otherwise stated.



13. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), perhaps in part because of the extremely difficult operational environment, the Great Lakes emergency operation experienced coordination problems. The "Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda", better known as "the multi-donor study", noted in March 1996, that:
- “The performance of WFP and UNHCR, the two largest agencies within the United Nations humanitarian system, was of critical importance to the overall response. Though the team was impressed by many aspects of the performance of the two agencies, the relationship between them was subject to unproductive tensions stemming from the division between them of the general ration supply/distribution chain. Despite development of a detailed Memorandum of Understanding between them, these tensions persist and are likely to continue, given their different perspectives on the same problems and the inherent difficulty of splitting such a critical function between the two largest agencies.”
14. The multi-donor study added that the DHA/United Nations Rwanda Emergency Office (UNREO) office in Kigali, which was "...small, ad hoc....[and] with a coordination mandate only within Rwanda", was simply unable to resolve such problems between two huge agencies with entwined operations spread across five countries.
15. The field staff of the two agencies on the ground in the Great Lakes were also aware of other points of operational contention, such as the counting of the case-load, reporting on distributions and accountability in general.
16. Even as the multi-donor study was going to press with its conclusions and recommendations, however, WFP and UNHCR staff in the region were endeavouring to bring the letter and spirit of the MOU to their collaboration in the field. In January 1996, they signed the first "WFP/UNHCR Goma Joint Work Plan", which covers - among other matters - needs' identification, distribution, monitoring, food basket, reporting, logistics, implementing partners, case-load, special feeding, repatriation, and rehabilitation and coordination mechanisms. This agreement was followed by two updated work plans later in 1996. Similar documents were negotiated for local cooperation in Bukavu and Bujumbura.

THE "CHANGE PROCESS", AND A NEW DESIGN FOR WFP IN THE FIELD

17. At that time, WFP was undergoing internal reforms which would have far-reaching effects upon all aspects of the operations in the Great Lakes, including but not limited to, inter-agency cooperation. In early 1996, the Executive Director committed the Programme to a series of institutional changes ("a new organizational structure") globally. The fact that some of the most important of these changes were first applied to the Great Lakes operation was largely a coincidence in time, but their impact was nevertheless significant.
18. In July 1996, the Executive Director issued a directive, entitled "Preparing WFP for the Future: An Organization to Meet our Mandate". The common theme of the paper was "keeping the field at the centre". Authority, resources and senior officers were to be moved to the field and grouped together into "clusters" or sub-regional structures (except for the largest country programmes).
19. These would be headed by regional managers who were to be given line management authority over the country directors within the cluster. Henceforth, "specific operational initiatives should come from the field rather than from headquarters." The paper specifically



linked this new arrangement to the Programme's ability to deal with fast-developing complex emergencies:

“The clusters/sub-regional structures are designed to be flexible and dynamic, to enable us to respond rapidly but in a coordinated way to complex emergencies. We will do this by ensuring that the geographic "coverage" of our field structure will correspond to that of the crisis, and have the flexibility to alter it easily when the situation changes or the emergency subsides.”

20. The first such structure to be instituted was the Great Lakes cluster, based in Kampala. A Regional Manager was appointed in August; he assumed his duties in Kampala in September.
21. Within the following month, civil war broke out in South Kivu, in Eastern Zaire. This represented a difficult early test for the new organizational structure. WFP was far too committed to the change process to turn back, and the war only accelerated the Programme's operational innovations. The next frontier would be logistics.

A PROGRAMME FOLLOWING A CASE-LOAD, FLEEING A WAR

22. The war that eventually changed the Government of Zaire started in the immediate vicinity of the refugee camps in Goma, Bukavu and Uvira in North and South Kivu provinces. In late October and early November 1996, as the fighting spread from south to north in the province, security disintegrated in the camps, and hundreds of thousands of refugees just disappeared. Non-essential relief staff, and finally all staff had to be evacuated by air from the area, an operation which WFP carried out by common agreement among the agencies.
23. As the immediate surrounding areas were virtually inaccessible, it was often difficult to determine exactly where the refugees had gone, although the Multi-National Force (MNF) was extremely helpful in this regard. In the days and weeks that followed, few crossed back into Rwanda, and it became increasingly clear that a substantial number had fled westward towards Kindu and Kisangani into an area completely inaccessible to relief agencies. Moreover, the majority of them were Hutu, and appeared to be avoiding contact with the rebels, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL), which included contingents of Tutsi soldiers from Rwanda, Zaire and Uganda.
24. From mid-November to late December over a million refugees did return to Rwanda from Zaire and Tanzania, leading to a four-fold increase in the case-load, to over 1.7 million. In order to supply food for this sudden, spontaneous repatriation, WFP drew communications equipment from its Nairobi-based Strategic Logistics Stock for Africa, and brought over 70 trucks quickly from Pakistan, Bosnia and Ethiopia.
25. But it was the disappearance of half a million refugees in Eastern Zaire that became the focus of attention of the international media. As many of these refugees began to be located in late December, the international emergency assistance (and human rights) community also drew the media's attention. Approximately 170,000 refugees were found in small villages and towns in the forest, in Tingi Tingi, Amisi and Shabunda. They were exhausted and hungry, fleeing ahead of the westward-advancing forces of the ADFL.
26. This extraordinary situation elicited an extraordinary response from the United Nations emergency assistance system in the region. Even as a DHA Flash Appeal was being prepared to fund the new operations, WFP was selecting forward bases for the staging of food shipments into Eastern Zaire by road, rail and air. However, if the kind of problems



highlighted in the multi-donor study were to be avoided, there was a need for a basic organizing principle in the inter-agency logistics operation to come.

THE FIRST UNITED NATIONS JOINT LOGISTICS CENTRE

27. The need for a coordinating structure for the management of United Nations logistics in complex, conflict-related emergencies had in fact been apparent for years. DHA, through its Military/Civil Defence Unit (MCDU) activities, had pointed this out in numerous United Nations meetings, reports, lessons learned exercises, etc. But the Department had simply not had the *gravitas* to make it happen. Instead, the United Nations logistics scheme for each new major complex emergency, like the coordination mechanism, was re-invented anew each time, usually in a rushed and politically-charged atmosphere.
28. But in the late autumn of 1996, it became obvious to all involved that the Great Lakes emergency was about to enter a critical new phase in a completely different theatre of operations. As is almost always the case, there were potentially conflicting mandates at play: UNHCR's to manage operations involving refugees, and WFP's to resource, ship and handle food for conflict victims and, under the WFP/UNHCR basic agreement, for "people of concern" to UNHCR.
29. One might have thought: "here we go again". Instead, the system came together impressively. Under the auspices of the DHA humanitarian coordinator, WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF agreed in November to establish a United Nations Joint Logistics Centre (UNJLC) in Kampala, to provide overall management for logistics operations region-wide. WFP, with its Regional Manager in Kampala, would act as the secretariat for this arrangement, without prejudice to possible future arrangements. The Security Council had just approved a multi-national force (MNF) for Eastern Zaire; the UNJLC would provide a single point of contact for military/civilian logistics management.
30. But the refugees in Zaire were on the other side of an advancing battle line. In order to feed, protect and finally repatriate them, it was decided to leapfrog the fighting and the refugees, and to forward-base the air operations in Kisangani, some 500 kilometres north-west of Goma, across some of the most heavily forested and least populated areas in central Africa. In the latter stages, the air operation was carried out under some considerable time pressure, as the leader of the ADFL declared in March that his soldiers would give the United Nations exactly 60 days to effect the repatriation of all refugees in Eastern Zaire.
31. Two logistics sub-hubs - Kisangani and (later) Mbandaka - were designated "MOVCONs" (for movement control). Like the UNJLC in Kampala, they were established with written guidelines agreed upon by the major participants: WFP, UNHCR and UNICEF. The MOVCONs were to be managed locally by a committee, and each of the two major agencies, WFP and UNHCR, would have agreed roles at each location. All transport assets (including those of the Red Cross and the NGOs) were pooled for assignment as required.
32. At Kisangani it was decided that WFP would handle transport by air and rail, and UNHCR, which had a truck fleet at its disposal, would arrange and manage road and river shipments. However, a different arrangement was made later at Mbandaka. WFP already had food stocks positioned when the refugees began arriving, and the transport required would be primarily for repatriating the refugees to Rwanda by air. Therefore, this time UNHCR coordinated all logistics using primarily WFP aircraft.



33. In effect, the MOVCON concept created a tent to cover the coordination of very temporary logistics arrangements at a particular time in a particular situation. When the local operation was completed, the tent would be struck and the personnel involved returned to their headquarters, or more likely, moved on to the next MOVCON.
34. It was understood by all parties that no precedents were being set. In the next situation, new arrangements would be established; new roles would be assigned. At the present time, MOVCONs are being considered (or are already being established) for Kigoma in Tanzania, for Shabunda, for Brazzaville, and for Bangui, CAR. WFP's Logistics Service (OTL) has made logistics assessments and contingency plans for all of the above.
35. The Kisangani and Mbandaka tents have already disappeared. The Kisangani MOVCON lasted for about eight weeks; the one in Mbandaka about four. Food and other relief items were flown in, mainly from Entebbe, and refugees were flown out to Kigali. Although there was some disagreement about roles in the very early stages, WFP and UNHCR got the job done efficiently and quickly. Over 41,000 refugees were repatriated by air from Kisangani, and over 7,000 from Mbandaka, in a little over 40 days.
36. The innovations and the operational problems which have emerged from these first few experiences have already been examined by the agencies involved, in the course of three regional logistics meetings which OTL has prepared and run. OTL has also taken a leading role in the drafting of standard operating procedures for the establishment of UNJLCs, in conjunction with UNHCR and UNICEF. A similar agreement to guide the creation of future MOVCONs has been drafted by OTL and is now under consideration by United Nations implementing partners.
37. The three major operational United Nations emergency agencies (UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP) jointly addressed the extremely difficult 'division of responsibilities' problem raised in the Rwanda multi-donor study, devised a solution to the problem, tested it in the field in subsequent Great Lakes operations, studied the results, and applied their experiences in drafting agreed procedures aimed at guiding logistics arrangements in future United Nations complex emergency operations.

TIMELY COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT

38. As indicated above, in late 1995 WFP received a substantial contribution for the establishment of AFRINET, a communications network designed to provide advanced and reliable communications capacity to the Programme's deep field operational sites, including logistics bases, relief coordination centres, and field and country offices, particularly in the Greater Horn. Initially, it was decided to focus project activities on the Great Lakes Region, where the operations were the largest and existing communications were poor.
39. The timing was fortunate: about a year prior to the devolution of authority to the field, and the establishment of joint logistics operations and their testing in the communications wilderness of Eastern Zaire. Both developments virtually depend for their success upon reliable and fast communications, particularly within the region.
40. The evacuation of staff from North and South Kivu Provinces, when the war broke out, proved the importance of telecommunications support on another level. At one point in the evacuation of Goma, Kampala/Entebbe had planes ready to go in to bring people out, but had no means of locating or contacting them to make arrangements. WFP's radio centre in Kampala was able to locate staff who were sheltering at UNHCR's Goma compound by an



"exchange of frequencies" with UNHCR Goma's radio network - too late, however, to land planes in Goma itself. Evacuation was effected by road to Kigali, and thence by air.

41. High frequency radio is used to enable 350 WFP users in the region to transmit both voice and e-mail to the hub in Kampala, via sub-hubs in Kigali, Bujumbura and Dar-es-Salaam. Some 1,500 e-mail messages are sent each day, on systems capable of transmitting text messages and any kind of attachments (Excel, Word, or even digital pictures). Connection outside the regional network is via the Internet. Operating costs are for Internet access and the few land lines used, particularly for communication within Tanzania and Kigali; they are a tiny fraction of those which would be incurred using the traditional systems such as Inmarsat satellite telephone.
42. While UNHCR's communications infrastructure in the region is quite different from WFP's, reflecting its own particular organizing principles and utilizing shortwave radio with Geneva as a hub, the two organizations have nevertheless relied on each other in numerous ways - sharing staff, expertise and hardware continuously. WFP has offered its implementing partners access to its communications net. UNICEF and Oxfam have agreed to add - and either have added or will soon do so - several stations to the net. USAID and Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) have also expressed interest. The establishment of a single communications net was a goal stated in the original AFRINET project document.
43. WFP's telecommunications activities in the Great Lakes emergency operation will not, like the MOVCON tent, fold up and be taken away when the emergency is over; at least not all of them. Inadvertently, the Programme has trained and staffed most of the key personnel in a commercial undertaking called BUSHNET which is providing Internet connectivity to commercial enterprises that are helping to make the Ugandan economy the African "tiger" it is becoming. The regional WFP Technical Support Unit (TSU) is also providing regular technical assistance to the Uganda Connectivity Project, which is hooking up Ugandan national NGOs over high frequency e-mail.

A TRANSPARENT PIPELINE, FROM END TO END

44. If it is true that "the exception proves the rule", then the wisdom of the regionalization of WFP's field operations is validated by the pipeline management system of the Africa Bureau (OSA) which is orchestrated from Rome.
45. In January 1995, months after the first large exodus from Rwanda, OSA drafted the first regional EMOP for the Great Lakes, and at that time a decision was taken to establish a computerized regional database to manage the complexities of resourcing and shipping food to the Programme's largest operation, involving five countries, four ports and the shifting case-load described earlier.
46. The system uses Excel software to guide the resourcing, schedule the shipping, and allocate and reallocate food contributions on a continuous, regional basis. Requirements are projected 10-12 months into the future, and are juxtaposed against food in the pipeline or being resourced. This permits very specific approaches to donors, for instance: "we need 2,000 tons of pulses for delivery in Dar-es-Salaam next February for use in the Kigoma refugee camps, as called for in the Consolidated Appeal."
47. Although a debate continues about whether this function should be moved to Kampala, the prevailing view to date has been that resources mobilization, procurement, shipping and logistics functions are all centralized in Rome, as are the resourcing contacts - the donors. In



the latter case, the fact that donors continue to make decisions on contributions at their respective headquarters, and not in the field or at the regional level, has been a significant if not determining factor in the debate.

48. In Kampala (and eventually also in other cluster offices), it is planned that a dedicated pipeline manager take over responsibility for the food at the dockside. The Food Aid Control and Tracking System (FACTS) is currently utilized to track and manage the food from that point onwards to the distribution points. The software for this system has been installed at 22 locations in the Great Lakes region, with more to follow. When first installed in mid-1995, this was WFP's first regional CTS. Outside the Great Lakes, WFP has such systems operating in seven other major emergency projects and in West Africa.
49. UNICEF has an Oracle-based tracking system for its central warehouse in Copenhagen, and intends to develop a field-based CTS next year, possibly with WFP's assistance. UNHCR has a CTS in the field, although the system does not perform pipeline management functions. An augmented system (SIMS) which does, will be introduced in Geneva, Nairobi and Sarajevo in the coming months. Both UNHCR and UNICEF, however, will need to develop the telecommunications/information technology (TC/IT) infrastructure and the LAN, in order to obtain real-time information about commodity positioning.
50. All three agencies agree that while the ability to see each other's pipelines is useful in major EMOPs, it becomes critical in operations such as Eastern Zaire, where logistic activities are carried out jointly. The initial step in this direction will be cross-training of data managers on other agencies' systems. To date, the primary fora in which these issues are being addressed are WFP's Great Lakes regional workshops on logistics, CTS and TC/IT.

A SIGNIFICANT ADVANCE

51. The most striking feature about the many technical, administrative and programmatic innovations in WFP's Great Lakes emergency programme is how interdependent, and in a sense, fragile, they are. The Programme's commitment to the devolution of authority to the field facilitated decision-making on the UNJLC and MOVCON arrangements. A functioning commodity tracking system, and indeed the entire concept of regionalization, depends very much upon the LAN that has been established and how it is maintained.
52. It should be mentioned that there was a strong element of good fortune in the timing of the implementation of these innovations and new or refined capacities. The "change process" regionalization concept was ready for field testing shortly before the spontaneous mass repatriation in Eastern Zaire. The AFRINET funds and the project manager were in place just in time to support the creation of the joint logistics facilities and the importation of the CTS to the region. No one manager or task force orchestrated this - it just happened.
53. Many of the innovations have in fact originated in the field, where the problems are so palpable, the answers seem so close at hand, and time is so critical. In a way, it seems to have helped to have broken the coordination problem down into its local, manageable, often technical, pieces. Can logisticians, information technologists, programme officers and commodity trackers succeed where negotiators have only partially succeeded? That appears to be exactly what is happening in the Great Lakes. In important ways the operation there has been a significant advance for the international emergency system of WFP and the United Nations.



NEXT STEP: A JOINT LESSONS LEARNED EXERCISE

54. Following completion of this interim study, WFP's Office of Evaluation has proposed to UNHCR and UNICEF that the three agencies jointly undertake a lessons learned exercise to examine and appraise the effectiveness of modalities for operational coordination in the Great Lakes. UNHCR has agreed to this approach, and UNICEF is considering the matter. The report that will issue from this exercise is expected to be presented, hopefully jointly, to the First or Second Regular Session of the Executive Board in 1998. As agreed with DHA, it will also constitute input on the broader Great Lakes lessons learned exercise which DHA is organizing at the request of the IASC.

