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WFP SUPPORT TO COUNTRIES IN ESTABLISHING AND MANAGING NATIONAL FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES

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FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES AND WFP'S MANDATE

1. Many billions of dollars are spent every year on national food assistance programmes. They are the major instruments for tackling hunger in the world. In many of the more advanced economies, the share of international food aid is only a fraction of what governments spend on targeted feeding programmes or food-for-work schemes using their domestic resources.
2. WFP's Mission Statement requires the Programme to "... support countries in establishing and managing their own food assistance programmes"; it also commits WFP to providing services such as "... advice, good offices, logistic support and information". Moreover, for many years it has been among the functions of WFP's governing body to "... provide a forum for intergovernmental consultation on national and international food aid programmes and policies", and to "... recommend to governments improvements in food aid policies and programmes on such matters as programme priorities, commodity composition of food aid and other related subjects."
3. Governments use a variety of instruments to improve the food consumption and nutritional status of the poorest segments of the population. An inventory of food intervention programmes carried out by FAO in 1988 showed that of the 56 developing countries included in the study, virtually all had food subsidy programmes of one kind or another. Fifty-three countries maintained general food price subsidies, 51 had disaster relief programmes, 47 supported institutional and vulnerable group feeding programmes, and 46 had public works/food-for-work programmes (FAO/CFS, 1988).
4. During the World Food Summit in November 1996, governments reconfirmed their commitment to improving poor people's access to adequate food. To this end, they pledged to:
 - a) develop and periodically update, where necessary, a national food insecurity and vulnerability information and mapping system;
 - b) implement, where appropriate, cost-effective public works programmes for the unemployed and under-employed in regions of food insecurity;
 - c) develop, within available resources, well targeted social welfare and nutrition safety nets to meet the needs of the food-insecure, particularly needy people, children and the infirm; and
 - d) endeavour to prevent and be prepared for disasters and to meet transitory and emergency food requirements in ways that encourage recovery, rehabilitation and development.
5. Over the past 30 years, WFP has gained experience and expertise in organizing programmes that provide direct food assistance to the chronically hungry and to the victims of natural and man-made disasters. WFP has provided food assistance and related advisory services for more than 1,000 food-for-work projects, over 240 school feeding programmes, more than 160 interventions directly addressing the critical food needs of mothers and children, and close to 1,500 emergency feeding operations. WFP assistance is usually provided in cooperation with governments, NGOs and other donors.
6. Apart from the planning and implementation of specific food assistance programmes, frequently there is also a need for more general information and coordination services.



WFP has often assumed a role in: elaborating common procedures for the provision and management of food aid; providing coordination services between food aid donors, NGOs and government of recipient countries; acting as a catalyst in mobilizing resources for food assistance programmes from national and international sources; and compiling food aid statistics. The Programme is well placed also to facilitate the exchange of food assistance expertise, provide information about effective uses of such programmes, and assist in establishing exchanges and partnerships.

7. The sections that follow include a review of the major types of national food assistance programmes, the role of food assistance in evolving development circumstances, the scope for WFP to facilitate the exchange of food assistance know-how and advisory services, as well as measures to provide such support.

NATIONAL FOOD ASSISTANCE PROGRAMMES

8. In recent years, there has been a shift from broad market intervention programmes to socially targeted interventions. Macroeconomic instruments such as general food price subsidies have proved to be expensive, too biased towards urban areas, and often in conflict with measures for economic stabilization and structural adjustment. Measures such as protecting vulnerable groups and ensuring food security through targeted food assistance programmes are expected to be more cost-effective and less distorting for the economy.
9. Opportunities for the cost-effective targeting of food assistance tend to be highly country-specific. Fair price shops and other methods of geographic targeting depend on a high spatial concentration of needy people; targeting by commodity is most successful in situations where there is a marked difference in consumption patterns of low- and high-income groups. Food stamp schemes are only feasible and effective in countries with a strong public administration.
10. An important option is direct food assistance. Direct distribution of relief food is often the only choice in situations where entire populations or groups of people have lost their basis of subsistence (for example, victims of natural disasters or refugees). Direct feeding programmes allow special attention to be given to infants, young schoolchildren, nursing mothers, the elderly and the sick. Institutions serving these target groups such as schools, and health and day-care centres often provide the appropriate administrative vehicle for implementing special feeding programmes. In addition, investments in education, training and health become more effective when the participants are adequately nourished, since malnutrition or irregular food intake interferes with their motivation and ability to benefit from the services provided. Food-for-work schemes provide poor households with income and access to food and at the same time create physical assets, such as improved rural infrastructure or increased productivity of agricultural land.
11. Direct food assistance programmes can be effective under circumstances where other instruments of securing food access by the needy tend to fail. For example, food assistance programmes are more likely to result in nutritional benefits to women, children and the elderly than cash subsidies, as food rations tend to be controlled by female members of households.



FOOD ASSISTANCE IN EVOLVING DEVELOPMENT CIRCUMSTANCES

12. Food assistance requirements are not static. Funding and design of food assistance programmes change as countries develop. The expertise and technical inputs required to launch effective food assistance programmes depend on the economic status of a country, the problem to be solved and the type of food intervention planned.
13. International food aid and related advisory services are of greatest importance for disaster-prone, least developed and low-income, food-deficit countries with a large proportion of undernourished people and very limited domestic resources. This is acknowledged in the WFP Mission Statement, which requires the Programme to concentrate its efforts and resources on the neediest countries. Food assistance programmes for acutely and chronically undernourished people in these countries often require a high share of external funding.
14. In these countries, WFP will continue to provide food resources together with advisory and technical support in all phases of the programming cycle of food assistance programmes. There is also a clear case for WFP to extend its advice, logistics support and information to programmes funded by bilateral donors and the host government.
15. A considerable number of developing countries are currently in the process of advancing from the low-income to the middle-income category. In some of these countries, international food aid is matched by substantial domestic funding of food assistance programmes.
16. Chronic hunger and vulnerability to acute food shortages caused by disasters are also found in middle-income countries and more advanced economies. Many have organized food assistance programmes and disaster preparedness mechanisms, including emergency food reserves.
17. As countries change, new relationships with WFP evolve. The share of national resources in food assistance programmes increases and may eventually represent many times the amount provided by WFP. But also the type and quality of the projects would tend to become different from the early phases of food assistance: more targeted, more participatory, with even more ambitious objectives.
18. As countries become less needy of external food resources, they may nonetheless benefit from support in the identification, design, planning, monitoring and evaluation of food assistance and emergency preparedness programmes. In particular, capacity-building measures such as training, assistance in the preparation of manuals, and facilitation of international exchange and work contacts could be provided. WFP could assign its staff members to this work and/or, more often, recruit other experts in public food assistance programmes to assist. The types of advisory support that might be required are illustrated in the box below.
19. Moreover, WFP can be of help as developing countries become the source of an increasing proportion of world food aid supplies. WFP has been facilitating this process, in particular through purchasing marketable surpluses (as available) or arranging triangular transactions; cash purchases of food aid in developing countries represent a significant and growing share of global food aid.



ADVISORY SUPPORT: EXPERIENCE AND REQUIREMENTS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

During a mission to Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, India, Jamaica and Jordan, the usefulness of advisory support in the following areas was stressed:

Food needs assessment

- Help in identifying food assistance needs (two countries)

Programme design and implementation planning

- Design and support in the management of food assistance programmes, especially school feeding (three countries), mother and child health care and food for work
- Design of food assistance approaches to reach specific vulnerable groups in most remote rural areas or vulnerable population groups affected by structural adjustment programmes (two countries)
- Promotion of participatory planning and community development approaches
- Development of the formula and concept for the local processing of nutritional foods for school feeding/child development programmes (two countries)

Programme implementation

- Local procurement of food for food assistance programmes or for triangular transactions (two countries)
- Assistance in the procurement, processing, packing and distribution of food for national feeding programmes, including school feeding
- Food management training for staff in health and education services
- Establishment of a data and information system for food aid logistics
- Assistance in food aid coordination (two countries) and mobilization of resources from other donors

Monitoring and evaluation

- Support to food assistance programme information and monitoring systems
- Evaluation after a pilot phase of new approaches to institutional feeding

Exchange of information and know-how

- Promotion of regional/international exchange of experiences with food assistance programmes (two countries)
- Establishment of a an information and communication system on food assistance issues

FACILITATING THE EXCHANGE OF FOOD ASSISTANCE KNOW-HOW

20. Although many countries launch food assistance programmes (mostly associated with the provision of social, education and health services), they may not be aware of relevant



experience elsewhere or draw on this international expertise, as there is no mechanism for the systematic exchange of such information. For the same reason, neither specialized multilateral institutions nor national institutions responsible for major food programmes are typically asked for advice on technical issues such as food requirements, commodity basket, logistics strategy, food management and distribution, monitoring and evaluation. Inviting external experts to participate in the evaluation of ongoing food assistance programmes (both programmes funded with national resources and those co-funded by international food aid) may offer a good opportunity for introducing international expertise. The same strategy could be applied in the identification and formulation process for newly planned food assistance programmes.

21. At the same time, it is seldom the case that valuable national experience is made known and accessible to other countries. Rare examples of actual international exchange have included the sharing of experience and learning from employment guarantee schemes based on food for work in the Indian sub-continent and, more recently, South Africa's interest in the organization of food assistance as implemented in the United States. Generally, however, there has been little international analysis and exchange of experiences concerning direct food assistance programmes funded with national resources.
22. Regional and sub-regional seminars and training workshops could facilitate the sharing of practical experiences among countries. A recent example of promoting exchange, forming partnerships and creating awareness about the role of food assistance was the WFP-hosted meeting of institutions from four countries (Germany, Italy, Sweden and United States) discussing strategies for domestic education on global hunger and related action in December 1996. Should individual countries wish to share their experience with national food assistance programmes or become sponsors of such programmes in other countries, WFP would seek to help in facilitating such exchange and cooperation.
23. Another instrument for assisting countries in the establishment and management of national food assistance programmes could be a catalogue of various institutions with relevant expertise and experience which could be made available, for example, through Internet.

AREAS OF POTENTIAL ADVISORY SUPPORT

24. There are a number of circumstances in which exchange of information and access to advice on food assistance could be particularly valuable. The emergence of new resourcing opportunities for national food assistance programmes is one such situation. It is not uncommon to find large numbers of hungry people even in countries with substantial food stocks. In years of normal or good harvests, food stocks may accumulate, not because there is no need for the food available, but because there is insufficient purchasing power. What is needed are institutional and budgetary mechanisms that allow the distribution of these food commodities to the needy. At the international level this thinking underpinned the establishment of WFP. The same type of mechanisms may now be appropriate on a national level, in developing countries that maintain surplus stocks of food. Available food stocks and market surpluses could be absorbed and utilized for targeted food assistance programmes within the country itself or in other (neighbouring) countries.
25. An innovative way of funding food assistance programmes was developed during the recent World Food Summit. It is the proposal (see World Food Summit Plan of Action, paragraph 53 n)) to explore the scope for "debt-for-food-security swaps", similar to the



debt-for-nature swaps that have been used to finance environment projects. Countries such as Bolivia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador and Viet Nam obtained both debt relief and environmental benefits as a result of such arrangements. Under a debt-for-food-security swap the debtor country, whose foreign currency debt would be cancelled, commits itself to using the same amount of money in local currency for strengthening its own food security, for example through food-for-work projects or through school feeding activities. Advice in the identification and design of practical mechanisms for targeted food assistance programmes may be required prior to entering into negotiations of such funding arrangements.

26. A second example of potential interest in food assistance expertise relates to countries that have recently scaled down or eliminated food subsidies or have been advised to do so in the context of economic stabilization and structural adjustment programmes, although there is a continuing need for some form of intervention for vulnerable groups. Expertise in the identification, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of targeted food assistance interventions could be of particular help.
27. A third example concerns the protection of vulnerable people in countries facing a reduction in international assistance. As a result of resource constraints, WFP has been reducing or phasing out its assistance programmes in several better-off countries, as have some bilateral donors and other agencies. Advisory services might be contributed as these countries establish their own food assistance programmes.
28. Advisory support may also be required in countries with a high risk of emergencies. Many developing countries are vulnerable to natural and man-made disasters and their consequences. Moreover, in recent years the growth in the number of complex man-made emergencies has been striking. Measures that prepare for, and mitigate, the precarious effects on the food situation once disasters occur will require experience and expertise in areas such as: design of and training in early warning systems, vulnerability mapping, disaster preparedness and mitigation schemes, emergency contingency and management plans, and logistics intervention strategies. WFP already provides some assistance of this kind, notably through its Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping Unit; at some future time, it may be able to offer assistance to a larger number of countries.
29. In working with governments to plan, implement and evaluate its activities, WFP shares with them more than three decades of practical experience with food assistance programmes and a wide range of expertise needed to make them effective. However, globally, the experience with food assistance is much larger. Relevant advice is available not only from WFP, but also from national institutions in a variety of countries. WFP could facilitate such matching of advisory needs with relevant expertise.

THE WAY FORWARD

30. Measures to carry out WFP's mandate of providing support to national food assistance programmes fall into two categories:
 - a) Promoting the sharing of practical experiences and food assistance expertise among countries through: conducting seminars and training workshops; facilitating the participation of experts from WFP and other institutions in appraisals and evaluations of food assistance programmes; and developing a catalogue of institutions with profound expertise in food assistance.



- b) Providing advisory services in all aspects of the programming cycle of national food assistance programmes or arranging for such expertise, should this be requested by individual developing countries.
31. Small allocations will be proposed within the budget for the next biennium to support the Programme's work in facilitating the exchange of food assistance expertise on a regional and global level as well as to help support the effective handing over of WFP food assistance programmes in identified countries. Such an allocation would co-fund regional seminars and training workshops, meet costs related to information initiatives and provide for advisory support to countries where WFP food assistance is scheduled to be phased out and which have indicated interest in continuing such programmes with their own resources. Funding for advisory support services in countries not receiving WFP food assistance could either come from service fees (in the case of middle-income countries requesting these services), or it would require a specific budgetary allocation by WFP or a bilateral donor.
32. The maintenance of close contact with governments and organizations concerned with food assistance programmes will be essential. This will be facilitated by the newly established structure of Regional Offices, with staff assigned to be familiar with and analyse the food needs and existing food assistance programmes in the region. In addition, the plan for phasing out WFP's presence in a country may include a transition period during which advisory support is provided through small offices staffed with national officers and supported by the WFP Regional Offices. Partners in the dialogue with governments would include other United Nations agencies (particularly in the context of the Country Strategy Note process), NGOs and other organizations.



