

Commentary

ISSUES IN THE PROVISION OF FOOD AID FOLLOWING DISASTERS

FREDERICK C. CUNY
INTERTECT, Dallas, Texas

(Received January 29, 1979; in final form February 1, 1979)

Each year, thousands of tons of food are provided to disaster-hit developing countries, primarily by means of food aid programs such as the U.S. Food for Peace (PL480) Program and the World Food Program of the United Nations. In the past, in-depth needs assessment and evaluation studies of the real impact of these programs on the societies they are intended to help have been virtually non-existent. Recent experience and a growing understanding of the problems involved in the provision of food aid indicate that the strategies used and the basic assumptions under which these programs operate should be evaluated and revised. Increased awareness of the types of disasters, of their effect on local food production and distribution systems, and of the options available to meet the needs of the affected population could substantially reduce the incidence of massive food importation and its negative impact on a developing society.

KEY WORDS: Food distribution, Food aid, Disaster, Civil War, Flood, Earthquake, Cyclone.

INTRODUCTION

Each year, millions of tons of food are supplied by food-exporting nations to the developing countries. A substantial portion of this food is made available after disasters with the intention of providing emergency and post-disaster supplies to replace food stores lost in the disaster. The United States, Canada and Australia are the world's largest suppliers of emergency food aid. Last year alone, the United States, through its PL480 program (Food for Peace), supplied 328,000 tons to disaster-hit nations† The U.S. PL480 program and the World Food Program of the United Nations are the two most important sources of supply. With the growing humanitarian concern about world hunger and the recent awareness of the role that disasters play in the cycle which retards economic and social development processes, the amount of food aid which will be available in the future is projected to increase.

In recent years, there has been a trend for post-disaster food aid programs to continue long past the initial emergency period. Droughts in the Sahel, failures of the rice crops in India and Bangladesh in past years have convinced many program administrators that a disaster will have a long-term

effect on food needs in a region, and that food aid should be continued until such time as food supplies are restored and the markets are fully back in operation.

The mechanisms which exist for supplying emergency food aid following disasters have been set up to meet short-term humanitarian objectives, based upon certain basic assumptions. The first and foremost of these assumptions is that the disaster victim has lost his supply of food in the disaster. The second is that normal distribution systems are totally disrupted and will be unable to function. The third assumption is that, due to the disaster, the victims will not have the capital necessary to buy food, even if it were available.

Due to the nature of most emergency and post-disaster programs, few sophisticated evaluations of the impact of food supplied after a disaster have been conducted, and the above assumptions have gone virtually unchallenged. Only in the last several years has there been a growing concern on the part of administrators that the overall impact of post-disaster food imports may have far greater negative than positive effects. From this growing concern, six major questions have arisen:

Is food aid necessary?

What is the social and economic impact of large-scale food programs on a country's development?

Is the food provided appropriate?

† Figure supplied by Food For Peace Office, U.S. Agency for International Development, based on FY78 (Oct. 1, 1977–Sept. 30, 1978).

If the food is necessary, how will it be provided?
Does the provision of food aid after a disaster
speed or delay recovery?
Whose needs does a food program meet?

DISASTERS AND FOOD NEEDS: THE ISSUES

In order to understand some of the factors at play, it is necessary to examine several different types of disasters. The four disasters that cause the most concern are earthquakes, large-scale floods (especially those caused by cyclonic storms), prolonged civil disturbances, and droughts. (AID, 1976)

Case I: Earthquakes

Earthquakes are particularly violent disasters and can affect extremely large regions. In Guatemala in 1976, over one-third of the country's population lived in structures which were damaged or destroyed by the earthquake. Thousands of people were killed, and transportation and communications were disrupted throughout the entire country. On the surface, such a disaster would seem to meet the criteria for massive importation of food; and indeed, a number of agencies immediately began planning food programs.[†]

However, such an assumption is incorrect. Civil buildings, bridges, etc., may be destroyed, but rarely are food supplies affected. In the case of Guatemala, most of the food was still in the fields, as yet unharvested; thus food was still available. What was needed was a place to store the food, and the rapid restoration of the market network to ensure that food supplies could be distributed. The harvesting and marketing of the food is the primary economic endeavor of the majority of the people living in the affected area. Even after the disaster, efforts to harvest, transport and market food took precedence over everything except immediate medical needs. In every location, functioning markets were in operation long before massive amounts of food could have been distributed by outside donor agencies. Nonetheless, several agencies continued their plans to import food,

[†] Among the U.S. agencies providing food aid were: CARE, Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, The Salvation Army and Direct Relief Foundation.

some on the assumption that it was needed, and others in an effort to improve the nutrition levels of the people throughout the disaster-affected region.

Two things should be mentioned here. First, the large-scale importation that was planned was viewed with alarm by the small farmers and the government.[‡] They reasoned that large amounts of food would substantially lower the price the small farmer would receive for the food he had produced. This concern was so great that several of the relief agencies, after failing to persuade the others to stop their food programs, attempted to stabilize prices by constructing large silos and buying food at the pre-disaster price. Second, those agencies that wanted to improve the nutritional level, using the disaster as a vehicle for initiating change, were working against tremendous odds. Experience during the past few years has shown that the primary concern of the disaster victim is to return to normal as quickly as possible, and that change instituted during a disaster rarely takes hold.[§]

Case II: Civil War

Food importers argue that such a conflict, especially if it is long-term, disrupts transportation and local markets; if the fighting is widespread, it may also disrupt farming. This rationale was used by agencies for importing massive amounts of food during the civil war in Lebanon in 1976-77. In the case of Lebanon, they also argued that it is a food-importing nation even during the best of times; therefore, massive emergency supplies would be necessary in the post-conflict period.

However, the Lebanese situation differed from what was immediately evident. First, even during the high points of the fighting, scarcity of food had never been a problem. Each faction in the civil war had to depend upon the loyalty of non-combatants within their area of operation and, thus, elaborate and rather sophisticated schemes were developed to ensure that food supplies flowed even through the worst of the fighting. Marketing and transpor-

[‡] "The Appropriateness of PI 480 Food Donations After the 1976 Earthquake and in Non-Disaster Times," edited interview with Francisco Batzibal Pablo and Benito Sicajan Sipac, by Robert Gersony and Tony Jackson, Chimaltenango, Guatemala, October 1977.

[§] "Disaster and Coping Mechanisms in Cakchiquel Guatemala: The Cultural Context," Dr. Margaret Kieffer, INTERJECT, 1977.

tation of food from rural areas were indeed disrupted; but in most cases the farmers were able to cultivate and harvest basic foodstuffs and to store them safely until the transportation systems were restored. Immediate needs after the fighting ceased were met by this reserve of food which became available when the fighting stopped.

Nevertheless, major relief organizations immediately initiated large-scale importation of food for the war victims. The food was distributed through the network established by each of these organizations and not through normal markets.† Concern immediately arose on the part of the farmers about the impact of this food on prices.‡ They needed to market their own surplus in order to be able to recoup expenses lost during the periods of fighting. In order to stabilize prices and guarantee a fair price to the farmers, the government initiated a price support program. But what about the fact that Lebanon is normally a food-importing nation? While the country does import large amounts of food, it is connected to other countries in the Middle East by an intricate import/export network. Post-disaster food programs operated outside this network and, had sufficient quantities been imported in this manner, it would have had a decidedly negative impact on the recovery of this vital economic system. Had this been coupled with a widespread lethargic agricultural recovery, the net result could have produced disastrous consequences for years to come.§

Case III: Floods

Flood situations are often cited as a justification for post-disaster food programs; this type of disaster does destroy food supplies and creates an immediate need for food for the disaster victims. The primary question in this case is not whether the food is needed, but rather which sources should provide it and through which mechanisms should it be distributed.

The cyclone and tidal wave which struck Andhra Pradesh, India, in November 1977 provides an excellent recent example. The tidal wave and high

winds accompanying the cyclone generated floods which destroyed between 70 percent and 90 percent of food supplies in the area where the cyclone came ashore. The tidal wave itself struck an area approximately 30 km. long and 15 km. wide. Flooding in the remainder of the cyclone-affected region did extensive damage in an area of approximately 500,000 acres (1171 square miles)—a very substantial area, especially when examined on-site.¶ To put the damage in perspective, however, the total area affected by the tidal wave represents less than two percent of the total irrigated area within the two districts where it struck. Within the entire state of Andhra Pradesh, the area affected by both wind damage and the tidal wave makes up less than ten percent of the total area under cultivation. While there was an immediate and pressing need for emergency food supplies in the cyclone-affected region, the surrounding area was largely unaffected.

There was a good crop in 1976 and again in 1977, and surpluses were available. India has a food bank for regional supplies, and the foodstuffs in it were relatively unaffected by the storm. The questions which faced program administrators were: Where should the food be obtained? How could equal distribution be assured? Should food be imported from outside the country, should it be purchased in surrounding markets, or should it be transferred from the food bank? Or should local markets in the affected areas be stimulated with cash so that normal market activities could take care of the food deficiency? Those agencies that considered importing food implied that such programs would be able to deliver food faster and more efficiently than would in-country purchase of food from existing stocks or stimulation of local markets. (In this case, massive importation would not have been more rapid. The roads were quickly restored; few vehicles were destroyed by the cyclone; and food began arriving from surrounding areas at a very rapid rate.)

The dearth of available capital for food purchases encouraged several agencies to consider food-for-work programs, while others argued that this in itself was another incentive for importing food. Again, the question of what effect food-for-work or outright gifts of food would have on the local food producers and markets was hotly debated.

¶ Taken from data provided in U.S.A.I.D. Sitrip No. 5, December 1977; from local reports; and from on-site inspection.

† Information taken from reports of CRS, World Food Program and UNICEF to the Committee of Voluntary Agencies in Lebanon, December 1976.

‡ From a disaster assessment report to Save the Children Federation by Charles MacCormack, SCF Program Director, December 1976.

§ The fact that more food aid was not provided is a tribute to the coordination efforts of the American Council of Voluntary Agencies in New York.

Several agencies decided that food distribution programs of any type would be a disincentive and offered instead labor-intensive projects which generated much-needed capital in the area. Their reasoning was that money injected into the area would have a far greater (and decidedly more positive) impact on recovery than would simple food distribution programs.

Case IV: Droughts

Finally, there is the special case of drought and massive crop failures. In these cases, are there adequate supplies and marketing mechanisms necessary to meet demands? The long drought in Sahelian Africa saw millions of tons of food imported over a seven-year period to supply the victims. There is no doubt that thousands of lives were saved due to this effort. But again, haunting questions remain. Did the imported food have a negative impact on the marketing of food that was available and that was produced in the region? Did the means by which the program was conducted and the way the food was distributed prove to be a disincentive to marginal farmers, adding those people to the ranks of refugees? Was the imported food similar to that to which the refugees were accustomed? Could food have been purchased in neighboring countries that were not affected by the drought?

There is no doubt that, from the relief agencies' point of view, it was simply easier to purchase food supplies in the exporting countries and ship it in.† The question remains: does a decision based on ease of administration serve the needs of the victim or the donor?

These questions and many others relating to the Sahel will take years to answer. But with the growing sophistication about how food is produced, and the necessity for working through local systems rather than outside of them, the resulting perspective is likely to be a condemnation of the wholesale importation of food.

GENERAL LESSONS

From past experience, then, what are the major lessons relating to the provision of food following

† For more complete information see: *International Disaster Response: The Sahelian Experience*, Barbara J. Brown, Janet C. Tutill, and E. Thomas Rowe, University of Denver, June 1976.

disasters? For example, what is the effect of a disaster on food needs, and when is the provision of food really necessary?

In order to further understand these issues, it is necessary to divide disasters into two categories: cataclysmic disasters, and long-term continuing disasters. In the cataclysmic disaster, there is usually one large-scale event which occurs, doing most of the damage and destruction. Following this single event, there may be a tremendous amount of suffering and chaos, but generally things begin to get better as time passes. In a continuing disaster, the situation remains constant or may even deteriorate as time passes. Cataclysmic disasters include earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, cyclonic storms and floods. Continuing disasters include prolonged civil strife, crop failures and droughts.

The damaged area in a cataclysmic disaster is usually relatively small, while the area affected in a continuing disaster can be extremely large. In terms of food and food distribution, cataclysmic disasters are normally more disruptive than destructive. For example, they may disrupt the transport of goods and the marketing system. They can disrupt or damage irrigation systems. To a limited extent, they do destroy food supplies, but the amount of destruction depends on the season, the location of the disaster, and the total area affected. On the other hand, continuing disasters not only disrupt transportation and distribution networks, but can often bring them to a long halt and ultimately destroy the system itself. (An excellent example is the effect of the drought on the traditional barter/exchange system of the Taureg nomades in Niger. Due to the extended drought, many Tauregs were forced to become sedentary and to enter the money economy.)

When, then, is food necessary? Food must be provided whenever victims are denied long-term access to normal markets, or when the local market system is not capable of meeting the demand for food. In the vast majority of cases, these conditions exist only in the continuing disaster.

The next question for an administrator is: What is the best form of food assistance? There are no simple answers to this, and the easy access of many private voluntary agencies to PL480 and World Food Program stocks has obscured the realization that simple food distribution programs may not be the best answer and that other options exist. In most disasters, agencies find themselves responding to a problem by addressing the products of that problem rather than its causes. Most agencies are

so blinded by the short-term immediate needs that they fail to examine closely the impact of the programs they develop to alleviate short-term needs, and they fail to examine the long-term impact of the program on the affected society.

If the food programs developed after disasters have had such a negative impact on the societies they were intended to help, why are they continued? First of all, the sophistication required in assessing the impact of these programs has only recently been developed. In the past, the cause-and-effect relationships at play (and especially the long-term impact of these programs on a society, both socially and economically), have not been well understood, nor have they been closely examined. Interest in this field has only recently become more widespread and as yet, few of the agencies involved in food distribution programs have acquired the capabilities to conduct such assessments.

Secondly, agencies are often caught in the "speed" syndrome. A disaster creates tremendous pressures within an organization to respond quickly, to make its choices about program options rapidly, and generally to get things moving as quickly as possible. Pressures are exerted by the disaster victims themselves, the local government, the press and, most importantly from the agencies' point of view, by the agencies' donors. Agencies fear that, if they do not take immediate action, both the opportunity and the funds will not be available at a later date. In this rush to action, needs assessment and sophisticated analysis of existing supplies, marketing systems, etc., go by the wayside.^f

Public pressure exerted on an agency to import food after a disaster is based on a misunderstanding of both actual needs and of the problems involved in this type of program. The general public labors under a very unsophisticated set of assumptions about developing countries, and surpluses from the industrialized countries are often seen as a simple expedient for solving Third World problems. All the major relief and development organizations must be called to task for their failure to communicate the realities to their donors and to the public at large.

^f There is much talk about improving the disaster assessment capabilities of relief agencies. While this is certainly worthwhile, a better approach would be to improve their understanding of an area long before a disaster strikes. In short, if an agency has not been involved in an area before a disaster occurs, it should not attempt to intervene in the post-disaster period.

There is a final factor which serves to perpetuate food aid programs, and it is this factor which has drawn most of the recent criticism. The food aid system has built-in incentives that reward massive distribution of surplus food. In the U.S. PL480 program, for instance, an agency that distributes PL480 food receives not only the food for distribution but also money for support of the staff involved in the distribution and a grant proportional to the tonnage delivered to defray overhead expenses. For some non-profit organizations, this arrangement can be a godsend; and a number of agencies receive a substantial portion of their operating funds for simply administering the various PL480 programs. There is nothing, of course, which would prevent an agency from purchasing post-disaster food supplies locally or from the surrounding area. But when presented with a choice of expending funds to do so with no cash return, or utilizing PL480 foodstuffs and receiving, in effect, a bonus for doing so, it can be seen that the PL480 program is a disincentive to agencies which would otherwise use their resources to stimulate recovery of local food distribution systems.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

What then is the future of food aid programs following disasters? Most assuredly, criticism will continue to mount not only concerning the way food programs are administered, but also concerning the impact they have on the societies they are intended to help. The essential question will be raised time and again: Whose needs does the program meet—those of the disaster victims, the donor agencies, or the food producers of the industrialized nations?

Many disaster experts predict a trend away from the provision of post-disaster food assistance, toward the provision of capital-intensive projects after a disaster that will help re-start the normal food distribution processes. Other disaster specialists are calling for increased awareness of the opportunities available in adequate pre-disaster planning/mitigation measures to prevent large-scale food shortages following a disaster. For example, they point out that those areas that are subject to drought and/or crop failures are, even in the best of times, marginal areas; these areas can be identified long before a disaster strikes and agencies can work to improve the agriculture in

these regions so that the effects of a disaster can be reduced, if not eliminated.

There are no simple answers to the issues raised in the provision of food aid. But it is vital that these issues be confronted and examined. Our understanding of both disasters and the impact of disaster assistance programs must continue to increase

if meaningful changes are to be made in the international relief system.

REFERENCE

- AID (1976) International Disaster Preparedness Seminar Workbook, U.S. Agency for International Development, Washington, D.C.