

Action Contre la Faim Food Aid Strategy

Action Contre la Faim (ACF) aims to save lives, relieve human suffering, and preserve and restore food security, by acting at different levels, while helping maintain the dignity of the people and protect the populations.

ACF's overall technical strategy considers the various levels of causes (direct, underlying, or basic), which determine the nutritional status of the individuals. This integrated approach is represented by the conceptual framework (figure 1) of the causes of malnutrition.

The technical department is divided into different services to best address the varying needs of the population and to fight against hunger from a variety of different angles. The services, (nutrition, medical, water and sanitation and food security), work transversally in order to define actions that can best respond to the specific needs within each context and to fight against hunger from these different angles. Each service liaises closely with the operations department in developing key advocacy points that aim to influence decisions which can have a direct impact on policy decisions and thus potentially impact the humanitarian situation of people around the world.

Food Security in ACF was originally based on the World Bank's definition in 1986: 'To ensure access and availability of enough food of appropriate quality to all persons at all times.' The key words are: **accessibility, availability, quality**. Today the utilization of food is also taken into consideration when considering Food Security programs and interaction with the nutrition service¹.

Today the objective of food aid programs is to respond to food shortages through direct food distributions and to enable the beneficiaries to become self-sufficient. Consequently, the ACF Food Security service is developing a specific expertise through its human resources recruitment and training to manage the food security programs from emergency food aid distributions to longer-term food security rehabilitation responses.

The programs are part of an overall strategy comprising:

- Analysis of the different aspects of food security
- Immediate food aid, responding to food shortage
- Support of the household economy, which helps to strengthen the mechanisms of access to food supplies (production, trading).

The approach developed by the Action Contre la Faim Food Security service is based on the analysis of household food economy and mechanisms put into place by the population in

¹ In ACF Paris Headquarters, food aid was incorporated as an integral part of the Food Security service in 2001. The fusion of food aid and food security allows for a proper analysis of the context and encourages immediate food security activities to limit the impact and duration of food aid activities.

order to live and survive, as well as the identification and targeting of the most vulnerable groups within the population².

CONTEXTS AND OBJECTIVES OF FOOD AID PROGRAMMES

Food aid is indispensable in many emergency situations when people lose their harvest or means of subsistence as a result of conflict, political or economic crisis or natural disaster, and are thus faced with food deficiencies.

In such a situation, food distributions should be conducted rapidly and effectively in order to ensure the survival of the people concerned, in addition to which parallel complementary actions are developed, e.g., supply of potable water, medical care and treatment of people suffering from malnutrition in nutrition centers.

In such a context, the distribution of food should enable the survival of people affected by a crisis by making foodstuffs available and accessible to them, in terms of adequate quality and quantity, so as to avoid malnutrition and diseases.

Often, another objective of food aid can be to prevent populations from resorting to survival strategies that are likely to engender long-term negative consequences in terms of their living conditions and food security: migration of the members of a household in total or in part, transfer of capital, new and unsustainable economic activities, such as cutting trees, etc.

IMPACT OF FOOD DISTRIBUTION

The expected impact of food distribution is thus above all nutritional since it tends to either improve the nutritional state of the beneficiary population or prevent its deterioration. Nonetheless, food aid often has other more or less desired effects, which have to be forecast and evaluated before the decision on an intervention and its modalities is taken.

The various aspects considered before ACF begins any type of food aid intervention are:

- ***Economy and living standards of a population***

Aid constitutes an economic resource for the beneficiary population, it can be sold or exchanged and can allow the transfer of the households' resources to other necessary expenditure. Sometimes food aid is an essential part of the resources of people in crisis situations and as such can become a major challenge for the population, the authorities in place or rival warring groups in a crisis.

Food aid can be a tool in the commercial or economical policies of international stakeholders which serves to accentuate the beneficiary country's dependency on external aid.

- ***Political situation and the social relations within a group***

The economic significance of aid can naturally tempt local politicians or despots to use this resource for political ends. In particular, food aid can serve as a substitute for government social welfare. Also, depending on the mode of distribution, aid can influence the relations within a group by, for instance, reinforcing power or situations of dependency. Aid can also facilitate the maintenance of a certain social cohesion or, on the other hand, create tensions (for example in the case where only certain groups are targeted).

² As food or cash for work programs do not necessarily target the most vulnerable amongst the target population, it is generally recommended to have free distributions simultaneous to the food/cash for work programs to provide aid to those populations who do not have the capacity to work.

- ***Security of the population***
The value of aid can also arouse the interest of armed, military or mafia groups, thus creating new risks, notably with new groupings and/or movements of the people.
- ***Economic organization of an area***
Aid can, by its very nature, enter into competition with local production and commercial networks and impact on market prices of foodstuffs in the beneficiary area. This concerns not only the impact of distribution but also that of the choices made vis-à-vis supplies (local or regional purchasing or importing from another region) and foodstuffs (type and varieties chosen) and type of distribution (in kind or voucher systems).
- ***Movements of people and controlling them***
Aid can stir up or stabilize people in the beneficiary area. The local authorities or military forces may be tempted to utilize aid as an instrument in displacement or regrouping policy. Inversely, local authorities or military forces may be opposed to aid when they consider that it facilitates the perpetuation of an undesired situation.
- ***Perpetuation of a crisis situation***
Aid can create a state of dependence and thus discourage people from returning to self-subsistence following a crisis. In certain cases, aid can also supply resources for armed groups involved in the crisis, through taxation, theft, or more or less voluntary participation of the beneficiary population in the war effort.
- ***Health of the people***
If under normal circumstances nutritional rehabilitation contributes positively to improving the health condition of beneficiaries, the distribution of rations that are insufficiently rich in vitamins and minerals may engender the emergence of epidemics and serious deficiencies, e.g., pellagra, scurvy and beriberi. Food aid becomes a risk particularly when it is the main resource over a prolonged period of time.
- ***Ecological environment***
Certain distributed foods require more fuel for cooking than others which can have a long-term ecological impact (through deforestation). If local food is favored this reduces the risk of GMO³ contained food being planted and thus is protective of the environment.
- ***Cultural aspects***
The import of foodstuffs can have long-term impacts on local cultural habits and local food should be favored to ensure the cultural acceptance of the food products.
- ***Transparency***
The more transparent the system, the more difficult it is to abuse it.

MODALITIES OF FOOD AID INTERVENTION

Food aid includes the distribution of food and when necessary of basic non-food items (blankets, jerry cans, cooking utensils) or/and cash.

Following the project cycle management, the activities are defined in order to minimize the above-mentioned perverse effects and to maximize the expected results of the objective followed. The methodology used is defined in ACF technical guidelines⁴, which are regularly updated through capitalization on lessons learnt and which take into account the Sphere Minimum Standards.

³ for more information refer to the ACF GMO policy document

⁴ See the ACF Food Security Modules

Modalities of intervention are based on the following principles:

- All food aid programs are preceded by an assessment and analysis of both needs of the population and the context (geopolitical and socio-economic). This includes the analysis of international stakeholders aid policies
- Food aid is a means and not an end: an exit strategy is prepared at the outset and could involve phasing into food security activities with a longer-term approach.
- Programs are implemented which are appropriate to the logistic, human resource and financial capacities of ACF, and which includes the security management necessary in the operational area.
- The composition of the ration is nutritionally balanced (including micro-nutrients), and takes account of cultural factors and environmental issues
- Local and regional purchases are favored when possible to ensure culturally acceptable foods as well as to support the local economy.
- Foodstuffs of good quality are ensured by integrating systematic control along the supply chain up to the beneficiary⁵.
- Existing local capacities are identified and built upon when possible throughout the program.
- Effective measures are adopted to ensure that the most vulnerable groups are efficiently reached while respecting security risks⁶, the local context and the dignity of the population.
- Monitoring is fully integrated into all program activities. Impact analysis is conducted in order to re-orient activities where necessary and to optimize the definition and running of future programs.
- Activities are coordinated with other partners on the ground to assure the best coverage of food aid.

TYPES OF INTERVENTIONS

Interventions can be categorized into 2 main types depending on the availability and accessibility of food in the zone. When food is not available or there is high inflation of food prices, ACF can engage in the following types of projects:

- Free distribution of dry rations (general or targeted): Free distributions respond the immediate needs of the population and should be used only when there is not enough food available in the market or to counteract a rapid inflation of food prices.
- Canteens or Soup Kitchens⁷: Provide support to household economy by providing regular meals to a targeted population. Canteens are time consuming for both ACF and the population and should be put in place only when the security situation or living conditions do not allow the families to prepare the food in their homes.

⁵ For more information refer to the ACF quality control guideline.

⁶ Security risks for both the population and the ACF teams.

⁷ Canteens should not be confused with school feeding programs which a primary objective of improving school attendance and education of children. As these objectives are not in the ACF's mandate, school-feeding programs should not be directly supported by ACF. For more information refer to the DFID School Feed Evaluation in 2004.

- Seed protection packages: Food aid should be given in conjunction with seed distributions when there is a risk that the families will consume or sell the seeds due to the lack of food available in the household. Food aid and seeds distributions are also appropriate in many cases during the phasing out of food aid projects.
- Food for work: Food for work is put in place when there is a lack of availability of food in the local markets or to counteract periods of high inflation. The work should aim to benefit the entire community or specific groups of the population and not individual persons. Food for work is most appropriate in conditions where the work accomplished will help improve the food security of the community (opening of enclaved communities, irrigation systems...)

When **access** to food is the limiting factor, the following types of programs are recommended:

- Cash for work: Cash for work should be used when there is a sufficient availability of food in the market, but the families lack the cash necessary to buy the items. As with food for work activities, the work should aim to benefit the entire community or specific groups of the population and not individual persons. Food for work is most appropriate in conditions where the work accomplished will help improve the food security of the community (opening of enclaved communities, irrigation systems...)
- Voucher distributions: Vouchers should be used as a distribution system to help promote the local economy and to give vulnerable families access to products locally available in the market.
- Subsidized sales: ACF can support the local markets and reduce the impacts of high seasonal fluctuations of food prices by subsidizing food sales for vulnerable populations.

ADVOCACY

ACF aims to contribute to reducing hunger, by informing and influencing policies and practices amongst major stakeholders and public opinion through evidence-based analysis⁸. Advocacy is based on the following principles:

1. Strong analyses of the causes, responsibilities and responses to hunger issues in certain chosen countries.
2. Identification of common factors in relation to hunger in countries in which ACFIN⁹ works – building up to define global trends.
3. Advocate on hunger issues at the community, national and international level.

Any document cited in this paper are available on request to ACF – technical department

⁸ Hunger Watch Report 2004.

⁹ Action Contre la Faim International Network – ACF France, ACF Espagne, ACF USA, ACF GB & ACF Canada

Figure 1

