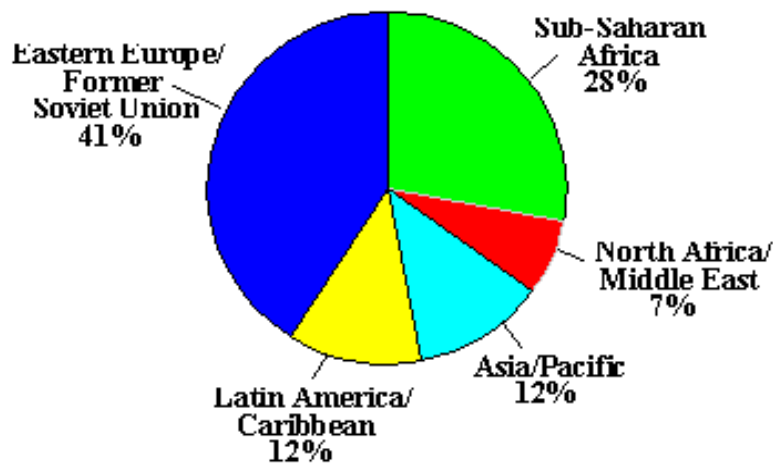


A Time of Plenty, A World of Need: The Role of Food Aid in 2020

by Patrick Webb

Food aid is one of the constants of human experience. The storage of food as public provision against crises is a practice recorded since Babylonian times. Since the 1950s, the practice has taken on a more international (and often political) character, with food being channeled mainly from industrialized to developing countries. In 1993, global redistribution of food by public-sector agencies reached a record 17 million tons.

Figure 1--Worldwide food aid, 1993

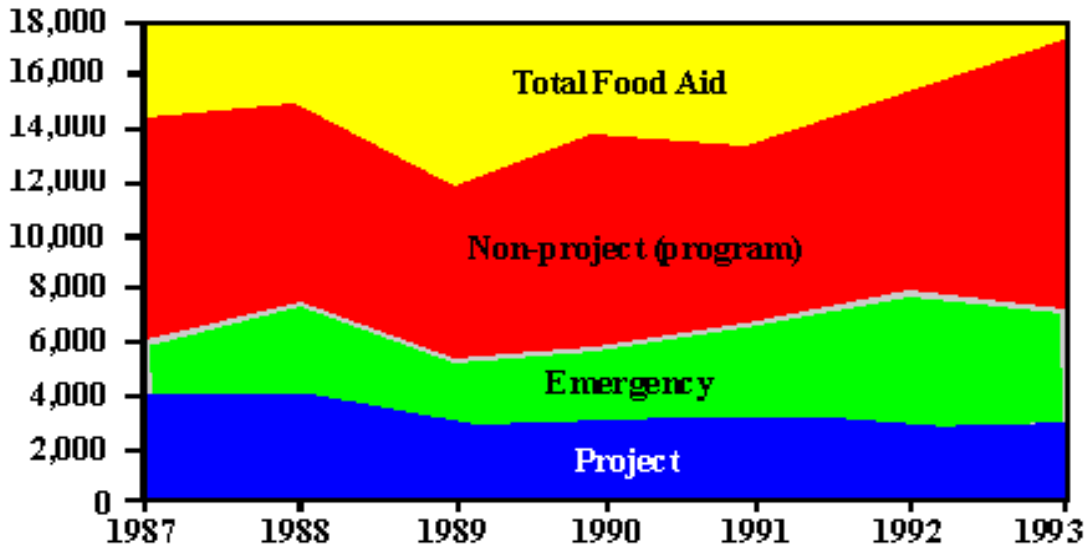


Source: Interfais, World Food Programme.

This large amount of food--nearly double the cereal production of the entire Sahel region in 1992/93, with a monetary value of almost US\$4 billion--represented a major resource to recipient countries. About one quarter of it went to feed vulnerable people in countries facing drought or conflict, such as Somalia, Rwanda, and certain countries of the former Soviet Union (Figure 1). The smallest share (less than 15 percent) was channeled through development projects, while the largest share (60 percent) was programmed as budgetary support to weak economies (Figure 2).

Figure 2--Food aid channels, 1987-93

Thousand Metric Tons



Source: Interfais, World Food Programme.

But two qualifications should be made about the record set in 1993. First, the 17 million tons of food fell far short of meeting real need. The amount of food aid required in 1993 to raise global caloric intake per capita to recommended minimum levels has been estimated at 24-27 million tons--around 50 percent more than was available.

Second, the level is not being maintained. Food aid supply is determined partly by the Food Aid Convention, which sets a pledging floor to which individual donor countries commit themselves for a number of years. The extent to which donors exceed that floor is determined by a multitude of market forces, donor policies, and international priorities. The end of Cold War influences on donor foreign policies, implementation of the Uruguay Round agreements, World Trade Organization policies, European agricultural and Lomé Convention policies, and the shaping (during 1995) of a new Food Aid Convention and a new U.S. farm bill will all have a bearing on food aid supplies.

In 1994, total food aid fell to around 14 million tons. The value of food aid fell from over 10 percent of total overseas development assistance in 1985 to less than 6ápercent in 1994. A forthcoming rethinking of foreign assistance strategies in the United States (one of the world's largest donors), may lead to a continuation of these downward trends.

What, then, is the likely role of food aid in coming decades? If the world in 2020 is still characterized by food surpluses and falling cereal prices, will food aid have a useful role to play?

Linking Food to Hungry People

The answer is yes; food aid will play an increasingly important role during the first half of the twenty-first century. Despite aggregate surpluses, current global concentrations of food surpluses in some regions and deficits in others are unlikely to change soon. Even if current (declining) levels of investment in agriculture are maintained to 2020, Sub-Saharan Africa will face an estimated deficit in cereals alone of almost 50 million tons.

Unlikely to have generated the foreign exchange capacity to cover this gap through commercial imports, much of Africa, and indeed many other parts of the world, will continue to turn to food aid—not as a last resort, but because it is a unique resource appropriate to meeting two special needs, humanitarian emergencies and chronic food insecurity.

Humanitarian Imperatives

The frequency, scale, and complexity of humanitarian crises have all been increasing in recent years. It has been calculated that the number of people affected by both natural and human-led disasters rose from 44 million in 1985 to over 175 million in 1993. The volume of food aid for relief operations rose from less than 1 million tons in 1979/80 to almost 4.5 million tons in 1993/94. The share of United Nations resources allocated to emergency and refugee operations rose from 25 percent in 1988 to 45 percent in 1992.

For the World Food Programme (WFP), the shift toward emergencies and increasingly protracted refugee operations has been even more marked. In 1986, WFP allocated 75 percent of its resources to development activities; the remainder supported relief and refugee operations. In 1993/94, more than 85 percent of its resources went to humanitarian emergencies and refugee needs.

Just as chronic food insecurity linked to poverty will still be a problem in 2020, it would be dangerous to assume that food crises will be fewer and less complex. Indeed, the complexity of many emergencies has been increasing (from largely drought-based to conflict-driven), along with their scale (from single-country to regional crises). Between 1970 and 1993, the number of people officially receiving protection and food assistance from the United Nations rose from 1 million to 17 million. If internally displaced peoples are included, the total rises to 40 million, many displaced as a result of political or military crises.

While one must be wary of simple extrapolation, it can be estimated that if the recent increase in refugees continued in linear fashion, the world would be faced with 250 million refugees in 2020, compared with 16 million in 1994.

Targeting Food Insecurity

The second area in which food aid has a comparative advantage over many kinds of financial assistance is in reaching large numbers of the world's most vulnerable food-insecure people.

Despite successes in many countries, absolute levels of chronic undernutrition and poverty continue to rise. The global population of underweight children below five years of age is expected to grow from around 193 million today to 200 million by 2020, with most of that deterioration in Africa. The total number of people likely to be under- or malnourished, now at 800 million, is likely to exceed 1 billion by 2020--without counting the even larger problem of micronutrient deficiencies.

At the same time, while poverty reduction today stands higher on the agenda of many governments and international donors than in the recent past, absolute poverty, particularly in Africa, continues to grow. According to World Bank figures for 1990, over 180 million Sub-Saharan Africans live below the official poverty line. This number is expected to exceed 300 million by 2020.

Unlike most financial loans (or grants), food aid tends to be used in support of activities of direct benefit to very food-insecure people in food-deficit countries, often as a wage resource that transfers income to poor households through labor-intensive work programs. Food aid is also used as an incentive to children and mothers to attend school or health clinics.

Approximately 3 million tons of food were allocated for these projects in 1993, but the demand will be much higher in years to come. Projections based on linear trends in population growth, production, and consumption suggest that food aid requirements to cope with "status quo" conditions in 2020 are likely to be 60-80 million tons--four or five times the current supply. This excludes a potential rise in emergencies.

Food Aid in 2020

Food aid alone cannot adequately treat, let alone remedy, the scale of need outlined above. Nor can such huge humanitarian problems be suitably addressed with financial resources alone. While structural food deficits, weak market infrastructure, inappropriate economic policies, and armed conflict continue to cripple growth in many countries there will be a role for food aid.

This role will be two-pronged, based on direct humanitarian interventions as well as programs that effectively channel food (and nonfood) resources directly to the very poor, laying the groundwork for an economic growth in which the poorest, more marginal regions will be able to participate. But resources for both relief and development are finite and diminishing. Food aid is an increasingly scarce resource that requires coordinated efforts to bring greater technical skills and financial resources into play in combination with food to maximize the positive impact of each.

Demand for food aid will not be lower in 2020 than it is today. The supply will depend partly on how effectively food aid is targeted and managed, and partly on the priority given by donors to the problems that are best addressed through food aid: namely, acute and chronic food insecurity. But, if food aid levels are to increase, the world's major donor nations will have to make the alleviation of mass food insecurity, in times of peace as well as in times of crisis, an explicit and urgent priority.

This brief presents the views of Patrick Webb, who is a policy analyst with the World Food Programme.

"A 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment" is an initiative of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to develop a shared vision and consensus for action on how to meet future world food needs while reducing poverty and protecting the environment. Through the 2020 Vision initiative, IFPRI is bringing together divergent schools of thought on these issues, generating research, and identifying recommendations. The *2020 Briefs* present information on various aspects of the issues.