

Chapter 1

Uniting on food assistance:

The case for transatlantic cooperation

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Natural disasters, conflict, macroeconomic shocks, and political unrest thrust tens of millions of people each year into food crises. In decades past, such crises commonly led to famines: episodes of unusually widespread mortality associated with undernutrition. But although the term “famine” is still casually used quite frequently, true famine is exceptionally rare today, due in part to substantial improvements in global food assistance policy and practice. Indeed, those who have not paid close attention to how the international community responds to food crises might be surprised by the radically different nature of food assistance today, as compared to a generation ago.

International food assistance was once essentially a single tool applied to every sort of food emergency: commodity food aid was shipped from donor country governments to recipient country governments. These bilateral food aid programs were organized largely to help major agricultural exporters dispose of surpluses generated by domestic farm programs, with the possible byproduct of advancing donors’ trade or geopolitical interests or recipients’ development ambitions. These programs were regulated by international agreements and institutions intended mainly to prevent food aid from excessively

disrupting commercial international agricultural trade. Most bilateral food aid flowed to recipient country governments, which sold rather than distributed the commodities—so-called “program food aid”—or occasionally distributed it in school feeding, maternal and child health, or related development projects (“project food aid”). When crises struck, those same food aid programs were deployed to ship commodities as “emergency food aid” to affected countries, no matter how ill- or well-suited donor country surplus commodities were to the specific context.

Four major global trends over the past 10 to 20 years have triggered a striking shift away from a relatively inflexible, donor-oriented system: growing scarcity of food assistance, an enhanced focus on emergency situations, increasingly multilateral and professional food assistance delivery, and an expanding emphasis on delivering assistance based on the assessed needs of affected populations. This book chronicles the most essential causes and implications of these trends, which have expanded international food assistance well beyond the simple shipment of donated food commodities. We pay particular attention to how these trends shape and are shaped by European Union (EU) and United States (U.S.) food assistance policy and practice. In this brief introductory chapter, we summarize key patterns, define central concepts, and explain how the world’s two largest food assistance donors are increasingly coordinating and aligning their approaches.

First, food aid has become increasingly scarce. As Figure 1.1 shows, food aid volumes have fallen steadily over the past decade, from 15 million metric tons in 1999 to only 5.4

million metric tons in 2009.¹ Donor countries' rollback of domestic farm support programs that generated large-scale, government-held stocks of surplus food commodities has been largely responsible for this decline. At the same time, donors have increasingly found more flexible and efficient means of responding to food insecurity in low-income countries, as demand for food assistance in response to natural and manmade disasters and rising food prices has grown substantially. The numbers of people affected worldwide by food crises has been increasing at an accelerating rate over the past three decades.²

[FIGURE 1.1 NEAR HERE]

Donors, operational agencies, local governments, and recipient communities have felt acutely the growing importance of more effective and efficient use of a scarce resource, prompting considerable research, innovation, and experimentation within the global humanitarian community. These ongoing explorations have demonstrated the value of resource flexibility in meeting recipient needs that vary markedly across contexts. Appropriate response thus requires careful assessment and analysis, as well as the flexibility to choose among a range of tools and, where in-kind food assistance is appropriate, among highly varied food products.

Second, food assistance programs have increasingly focused on emergency response to food crises. The use of food aid as a tool for longer-term development assistance has

fallen out of favor as research and practice have reinforced longstanding beliefs that in-kind food transfers are rarely the best tool for addressing chronic poverty and food insecurity, but commodities can be essential in humanitarian response. Aid agencies have gained flexibility in the way they provide food assistance as major donor countries have shifted away from donating in-kind commodities, due to changes in the domestic politics of farm support and increased attention to agricultural trade liberalization in the current round of World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations.³

The result has been a dramatic reorientation of global food aid toward emergencies and Africa. In the 1980s, less than 20 percent of food aid flowed in response to emergencies, but by 2008–9, the figure was more than 75 percent (Figure 1.1). The most crisis-ravaged continent, Africa, absorbed 70 percent of global food aid flows by 2008–9, while a decade earlier it had received only about one-third of all shipments. As recently as the 1990s, strategically important middle-income countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Poland and Russia were among the leading food aid recipients, but for the past decade, they have been supplanted by crisis-affected countries like Ethiopia, Haiti, North Korea, Somalia, and Sudan. Indeed, protracted emergencies—many of which couple political unrest or violence with persistent poverty and poorly functioning agricultural markets—now draw roughly two-thirds of emergency food aid.⁴

Third, the rise of emergency food aid, especially in response to complex emergencies, has resulted in increasingly multilateral and professional food aid deliveries. Through the

1990s, most international food assistance was bilateral program food aid, given by one government to another government and handled by agencies (such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture) for which food assistance was not a core organizational priority. The remainder was roughly evenly divided between project or emergency food aid granted to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and commodities channeled through the United Nations' World Food Programme (WFP). Over the past decade, however, the WFP has become the clear global leader in food aid deliveries and the single most important hub for operational innovations in food assistance more generally. The WFP's rise has gone hand in hand with the increased use of new food aid tools, in particular local and regional purchases (LRP) of food aid, where donors provide cash that operational agencies then spend to buy commodities in developing countries much closer to targeted recipients (Figure 1.2).⁵ Bilateral food aid remains almost entirely in-kind commodity shipments from the donor country; less than 10 percent of bilateral food aid takes the form of local and regional purchases. As bilateral donors have relaxed longstanding restrictions that food aid must be bought in and shipped from the donor country, they have turned increasingly to the WFP to implement the food deliveries they finance.

[FIGURE 1.2 NEAR HERE]

This move toward multilateral food aid delivery has been mirrored by increased donor and operational agency collaboration around early warning, needs assessment, and

situation and response analyses, as well as the emergence of global codes of conduct. Food assistance has grown more professionalized, increasingly driven by the cumulative experience of seasoned practitioners operating within or in collaboration with agencies for which food assistance is a first-order strategic priority, and somewhat less by donor countries' commodity surpluses.

Beyond the dramatic growth of professional products like assessments and analyses, the trend toward professionalization is perhaps most starkly reflected in the shifting commodity composition of food aid. In the mid-1970s, wheat and wheat flour represented nearly 80 percent of global food aid, as the main donors all ran domestic farm support programs that generated large government-owned wheat stocks that were expensive to store. As those farm programs ended, reducing the need for bilateral food aid programs to dispose of the surpluses, wheat and wheat flour's share shrunk dramatically. By 2009, they represented only one-quarter of global food aid.

Fourth, as food assistance has grown increasingly multilateral and professional, it has become somewhat more insulated from domestic donor politics, enabling a growing emphasis on recipient needs. Although domestic concerns inevitably shape the complex politics of authorizing and financing international food assistance programs, there has been a palpable shift in the rhetoric around international food assistance programs in all donor countries. The commodity basket has broadened dramatically, reflecting widespread recognition of the varied nutritional needs of distinct target subpopulations in

different contexts. Timeliness, quality, and impact receive far greater attention now than even a decade ago.

Increased emphasis on recipient needs has paralleled a major shift in thinking about food insecurity, with emphasis moving away from the supply-side obsession with food “availability” and toward demand-side issues of “access” by vulnerable people.⁶ Growing recognition that most poor people buy food in commercial markets has encouraged greater use of cash and voucher transfers as a means to increase nutrient intake, even in emergencies. Interest in cash and voucher responses to food insecurity took off following the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. That disaster elicited an overwhelming volume of cash donations that combined with negligible damage to food production and marketing systems beyond the immediate coastal areas, sparked widespread experimentation with and evaluation of cash and vouchers as alternatives to in-kind food deliveries.⁷ A growing body of solid evidence underscores that non-food responses are often—but by no means always or everywhere—best-bet responses to food crises.

Nonetheless, not all food insecurity reflects a lack of access; food availability remains limiting in many places. In 2007, the most recent year for which food balance sheet data are available, more than one-quarter of the world’s countries—and more than half of those in sub-Saharan Africa—lacked adequate food supplies to meet their populations’ basic calorie and protein needs, even if these macronutrients were equitably distributed.⁸ But because there is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question of how best to fill

availability shortfalls, disputes often arise among well-intentioned donors, especially in the absence of careful response analyses that identify the best instrument for addressing a specific food insecurity context.

Further, although the utilization pillar of food security has historically received far less attention than either availability or access, food safety and nutrition are growing concerns within the international food assistance community. The past decade has seen significant modifications and additions to the roster of in-kind commodities provided in feeding programs; novel delivery approaches, such as community-based management of acute malnutrition; and increasing awareness of food safety concerns, such as mycotoxin contamination. These emerging trends will continue to shape the future directions of food assistance programming.

These broad trends notwithstanding, tensions have emerged among the major donor countries because food assistance policy and practice have changed at different rates in different places, while the global institutional architecture for managing food assistance remains largely unchanged since 1970. Bringing the policy and practice of individual donors into accord might facilitate systemic change that could align the global food assistance architecture with recent advances detailed in the chapters that follow. The transatlantic relation between Europe and the United States—the focus of this volume—is key to such cooperation.

EU AND U.S. COMING TOGETHER?

European and United States food assistance programs are the world's largest. Over the past decade, the EU and U.S. together accounted for more than three-quarters of global food aid, although this aggregate share fell to just under 70 percent by 2009 (Figure 1.3). If reliable data were available on non-food support for food assistance programs—in particular, cash and voucher transfers intended to increase the quantity or quality of food consumed by recipients—this pattern would almost certainly still hold, as these two donors also account for the bulk of non-commodity food assistance.

Rapid changes in global food assistance over the past decade or so have opened up further policy and programming differences between the EU and U.S., which have strikingly different histories of food aid provision and are confronted with different domestic political constraints. Indeed, even within the EU, the European Commission's food assistance policies and various individual states' policies differ in important ways. International policy and programming differences have sparked some tensions, as manifest in the surprisingly contentious place of food aid in the now-stalled WTO Doha Round negotiations of a new agreement on agriculture. These differences and tensions also surfaced periodically during the several years of informal negotiations that preceded the formal launch of renegotiation of the Food Aid Convention in December 2010. Divergent international food security and food assistance policies landed these issues on the agenda of the 2009 EU--U.S. Summit.

[FIGURE 1.3 NEAR HERE]

Throughout this volume, we emphasize comparison between policies and practices of the European Commission (EC), which represents the EU member states collectively, and the U.S. government. These are two very different types of administrations. The EC is a supranational, intergovernmental organization that has clearly separated administrative responsibility for emergency food assistance from longer-term food security concerns and is somewhat insulated from country-specific domestic political pressures. The U.S. government, by contrast, interlinks programs addressing all manner of food security and emergency response concerns, in part because of domestic political pressures that routinely shape such policies.

Despite significant remaining policy and structural differences between the main food assistance donors, the next several years could bring growing transatlantic convergence in international food assistance policy. Processes such as the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative and the EU--U.S. Transatlantic Development Dialogue—launched after the July 2009 G-8 Summit in L'Aquila, Italy—have reinforced EU and U.S. movement in the direction of renewed attention to international food security, both through shared commitments to long-term agricultural development and improved humanitarian response to food crises. The trend is clearly toward increased donor cooperation and coordination.

Widespread experimentation with new food assistance tools, the use of new food commodities, increasingly multilateral and professional food assistance, and the emergence of new political leadership are prompting policy review on both sides of the Atlantic. Global food assistance is changing rapidly, and the evidence on which policies are built and revised is likewise accumulating quickly. But it remains to be seen whether increased transatlantic collaboration in country- and region-level programming translates into a meeting of the minds on food assistance policy more generally.

A central premise of this volume is that transatlantic differences can be turned into strengths, especially if the fragmented and ineffectual global food assistance architecture is reformed, beginning with a renegotiated Food Aid Convention.⁹ The EU's greater emphasis on needs assessments and use of cash and vouchers can usefully complement and integrate with U.S. innovation in prepositioning food aid and market and response analysis. Operational agencies, such as WFP, that work with both major donors are meanwhile advancing the state of the art in food quality control (both nutrition and safety), as well as needs assessments and situational and response analysis, drawing on the strengths of each donor to create an increasingly widely accepted set of best practices. Furthermore, emerging donors including Brazil, China, India, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa are slowly forcing change in international food assistance architecture and practice. These issues remain heavily politicized, and background processes such as climate change, the global diffusion of genetically modified crops, and fiscal crisis in Europe and the U.S. pose real challenges to transatlantic agreement on food assistance

policies. Nonetheless, there is clearly reason for optimism as the shackles of past practices founded on the disposal of domestic commodity surpluses fall away and the advances of the past decade earn widespread acceptance.

KEY CONCEPTS AND TERMS

The ongoing evolution of the terms food aid and food assistance has resulted in subtle but critically important distinctions. At times the usage is muddled in the relevant literature and policy documents. The existence of multiple similar, but sometimes overlapping or contradictory, definitions among agencies fuels confusion and disagreement. The important definitional differences between food assistance, food aid, and food security, however, highlight the expansion of tools used today to address hunger and food insecurity. In order to contribute to a clarification, the following terms and concepts are consistently applied throughout this volume.

Food assistance encompasses any internationally financed direct food, cash, or voucher transfer to food-insecure individuals or households for the purpose of increasing the quality or quantity of food consumed, so as to improve recipients' health and nutritional status.¹⁰ This definition includes many different tools of food assistance: *emergency* or *humanitarian food aid*¹¹ (procured locally, regionally, or in the donor country), non-emergency project food aid (not including food aid sold—*monetized*—by NGOs), and vouchers and cash transfers. These can be either *unconditional* or *conditional transfers*,

the latter providing transfers only conditional on specific recipient behaviors, such as food for work, school feeding for children who attend classes, or food vouchers given to mothers who bring their children to health clinics for growth monitoring. Transfers delivered through school feeding programs or maternal and child health programs are food assistance if they are internationally financed and are explicitly intended to increase the quality or quantity of food consumed. On the other hand, this definition excludes program (government-to-government) food aid, monetized project food aid, agricultural development aid, food subsidies, food price stabilization, vouchers for products other than food, and cash transfers, social protection policies, and livelihoods support interventions not explicitly intended to increase food consumption.

Food aid is the provision by foreign donors of food commodities, for free or at a steep discount from commercial terms, to individuals or institutions within a single country.¹² Food aid, as understood in this volume, refers exclusively to in-kind food transfers, including program and project food aid. When food aid must be sourced and shipped from the donor country, it is deemed *tied*.¹³ Over the past two decades, most donors have untied their food aid, meaning they ended geographical limitations on the sourcing of donated commodities. Untying has sparked a rapid increase in *local and regional purchases* of food commodities. *Program food aid* encompasses all in-kind food aid directly provided on a government-to-government basis. It is typically sold to the recipient government on highly concessional terms for resale on local markets. *Project food aid*, on the other hand, is in-kind food aid provided on a grant basis to a recipient

government or NGOs operating in the recipient country for use in development or food security projects. Some of this food aid may also be monetized and the cash proceeds used to support related food-security programs. Program and project food aid are sometimes referred to jointly as *developmental food aid*, reflecting their non-emergency orientation.

Food security exists “when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life,” as agreed at the 1996 World Food Summit. Food insecurity exists when this condition is not met. Food security is commonly conceptualized as resting on three pillars: availability, access, and utilization. Availability is necessary but not sufficient to ensure access, which is in turn necessary but not sufficient for effective utilization.¹⁴ In recent years the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and some experts have suggested a fourth pillar: stability. Including stability highlights the important distinction between *acute* (or *transitory*) *food insecurity* and *chronic food insecurity* that persists for many years.

Hunger is a physiological phenomenon, defined by the widely cited 2008 *Lancet* series on maternal and child undernutrition as the discomfort experienced from not eating. The term is often used interchangeably with undernourishment, and at times (albeit incorrectly) with undernutrition or protein-energy malnutrition. *Undernutrition* can more accurately be defined as occurring when one of the following is present: stunting (being

too short for one's age), wasting (being underweight for one's height), or deficiencies of macronutrients (protein, fat or carbohydrates) or micronutrients (essential vitamins and minerals).¹⁵ *Malnutrition* is an umbrella term that includes undernutrition and overnutrition, defined as the overconsumption of specific nutrients and ultimately manifesting as overweight or obesity. *Chronic undernutrition* is caused by long-term nutritional deprivation and often results in stunting, whereas *acute undernutrition* is caused by a sharp decrease in food intake and/or by an illness and results in wasting or oedema. *Moderate acute undernutrition* and *severe acute undernutrition* are distinguished by an individual's severity of wasting.

The *programming cycle* refers to the information collection processes, analytical and planning tasks, and program implementation activities that occur as operational agencies prepare for, respond to, and learn from humanitarian interventions. These are separate but largely simultaneous activities that create a critical feedback loop for donors and implementers. *Needs assessments*, which identify the target population for an intervention, the prevalence and intensity of its food insecurity, and its most pressing nutritional needs, are a critical step as they inform appeals to the international community for food assistance and are intended to guide program planning and response. *Response analysis* is a relatively new function intended to identify the best means of responding to assessed need in a particular food insecurity situation. The importance of response analysis has increased exponentially with the emergence of a range of feasible food assistance tools.

A TRANSATLANTIC COLLABORATION

This volume is the product of a 15-month collaborative research project between Cornell University in the U.S. and the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPi) in Germany. Our teams bring considerable direct experience in the global food assistance community, conducting research, consulting, and working with and for various agencies on both sides of the Atlantic and in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Middle East. Drawing on our prior experiences, researchers from both institutions gathered on four different occasions to review the literature and share their individual and collective experiences related to global food assistance. We did not collect any new primary data in field sites for this project. The chapters are based instead on secondary literature review—including unpublished gray literature and reports—and interviews with key policymakers and practitioners in donor and operational agencies.

Two of our meetings involved a broader set of experts in events we termed “transatlantic dialogues on humanitarian action” (TDHA). At the first TDHA, in Potsdam, Germany, in July 2010, our team presented the research framework and—in close collaboration with participating researchers, policymakers, humanitarian practitioners, and other stakeholders—further refined key research questions for the project. At the second TDHA, held in Warrenton, Virginia, in March 2011, we presented and vetted our

research results, developing and refining our resulting recommendations. The draft chapters were also reviewed by several international experts in March and April 2011.

This volume is the fruit of the project. In it, we outline the changing policies and practices and the relatively stagnant global food assistance architecture that have generated transatlantic tensions. The volume also—more hopefully—illustrates how the EU and U.S. now show signs of convergence toward more refined, evidence-based and recipient-oriented approaches to food assistance. After explaining and analyzing the current global food aid architecture and contemporary EU and U.S. international food assistance policies, we devote most of the book to surveying the rapidly emerging evidence on evolving policies concerning needs assessments, response and situation analyses, new food assistance tools, and food aid quality. Based on this emergent evidence, we close the book by identifying key principles and some specific actions that can help to resolve remaining differences and promote complementary programming that will allow the international community's best response to the food crises that threaten vulnerable populations in the developing world.

CHAPTER 1 NOTES

¹ The data come from the World Food Programme's Food Aid Information System

(<http://www.wfp.org/fais/>, accessed March 15, 2011).

² For details, consult the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT, <http://www.emdat.be/>, accessed March 15, 2011) available online from the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) or any of CRED's reports on trends in disasters.

³ See Clapp forthcoming, Paarlberg 2010 or Barrett and Maxwell 2005 for recent in-depth treatments of evolving food politics and its relation to international food assistance.

⁴ FAO 2010.

⁵ The data come from the World Food Programme's Food Aid Information System

(<http://www.wfp.org/fais/>, accessed March 15, 2011).

⁶ This shift dates mainly to Amartya Sen 1981, whose famous opening sentences emphasized that "starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat. While the latter can be a cause of the former, it is but one of many *possible* causes" (p.1, emphasis in original).

⁷ Harvey 2007 summarizes much of this experience.

⁸ According to the FAO (<http://apps.fao.org/cgi-bin/nph-db.pl>, accessed March 15, 2011), 73.4 percent of the 177 countries for which data were available had at least 2,350 kilocalories and 55 grams of protein available per person per day, sufficient to meet basic macronutrient requirements. However, 2.3 percent (4 out of 177) of countries lacked sufficient protein, 11.3 percent had inadequate calories, and 13.0 percent suffered availability shortfalls of both essential macronutrients.

⁹ Our recommendations are outlined in Gaus et al. 2011.

¹⁰ This definition slightly adapts the definition advocated by the Trans-Atlantic Food Assistance Dialogue 2010.

¹¹ Technically, one could argue that humanitarian assistance focuses on saving lives and thus is a proper subset of broader emergency assistance, where an emergency is defined as a specific shock that impacts food security. In practice—and in this volume—the two terms are commonly treated as synonyms.

¹² Barrett and Maxwell 2005.

¹³ “Tying” refers to the longstanding practice of mandating that aid money be spent on goods or services produced in and shipped from the donor country. Untying aid means eliminating geographical limitations on sourcing. See Barrett and Maxwell 2005 or OECD 2006 for in-depth discussions of food aid tying.

¹⁴ Webb et al. 2006.

¹⁵ Black et al. 2008.