

Misconceptions about food assistance

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International food aid¹ is a longstanding, valuable instrument for responding to food emergencies around the world. Over the past decade or so, the food assistance toolbox has expanded significantly, beyond the traditional shipment of commodities from donor countries. In order to speed up delivery and reduce costs, most donors now buy a majority of their food aid commodities in the developing world, a practice known as local or regional purchase or procurement (LRP). Especially since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, donors increasingly use cash and voucher transfers, instead of food aid, where markets function well and people suffer acute undernutrition mainly due to a collapse in purchasing power. The food aid basket has also changed markedly to include a wider assortment of special food products formulated to address the varied nutritional needs of distinct target populations, including severely undernourished infants or lactating women.

In spite of growing evidence of its effectiveness, the new food assistance toolbox faces some resistance. Misconceptions abound, in part because of limited experience with some new tools, and in part because of political opposition to changing policies and practices on the part of specific interest groups. This brief aims to dispel some of the myths that surround the newer components of the international food assistance toolbox.

Local and regional food aid procurement

Donor use of LRP increased from about 13 percent of total global food aid in 1994 to 50 percent in 2009. The World Food Programme (WFP) alone procured more than two million metric tons of food in developing countries in 2009. In most circumstances, LRP proves quicker and cheaper than shipments from donor countries, enabling more cost-effective humanitarian response and reducing unnecessary suffering among disaster-affected populations. But various concerns still arise, not all of them well founded.

Myth: LRP increases the risk of compromising food aid safety and quality. With the growth of LRP, concerns have grown about donors' ability to adhere to important quality and safety standards in order to ensure that foods provided are both safe and contain consistent nutritional content. LRP relies on the food safety and quality assurance mechanisms of the commercial food industry in developing countries. Since safety standards in these countries are often lax or poorly enforced, this has generated apprehension among some donors and operational agencies.

In particular, concern exists over whether LRP programs can manage risks of dangerous contamination from mycotoxins. High mycotoxin concentrations in maize and groundnuts have been documented throughout the developing world and are thought to be particularly widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa.



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LRP programs can also involve sourcing foods from numerous small lots. This increases the risk of uneven food quality and the potential entry points for food contaminants. Donors and implementing agencies involved in LRP programs must therefore adopt and enforce appropriate standards, codes of practice and protocols that address the potential food safety risks that can arise when procuring food in a developing country context. This includes paying greater attention to harvest and post-harvest practices of suppliers.

Food safety concerns, however, are not unique to LRP programs and LRP offers some food safety advantages over transoceanic shipments. The increased storage and transit times common to transoceanic food aid can increase the risk of mold growth and pest infestation in food aid commodities. Furthermore, missing and/or conflicting standards across donors, implementing agencies and recipient countries have at times resulted in serious gaps in quality assurance mechanisms across all types of food assistance programs. Finally, if a field agency receives unsafe or low quality products from another continent, it may face more serious challenges to quickly replace such products than if they were sourced locally or regionally.

Whether foods are sourced locally, regionally or in donor countries, ensuring the quality and safety of foods is an essential component of any food assistance program. While LRP programs present new challenges and requirements for food safety management in food assistance, they also offer some advantages. To date, there is no systematic evidence demonstrating that LRP poses substantially greater or lesser food safety risks than does traditionally procured food aid sourced in donor countries.

Cash and voucher transfers

Growing recognition that food insecurity does not always derive from insufficient food availability, but often from insufficient access instead, and that most poor people buy food in commercial markets, has sparked greater use of cash and voucher transfers as a food assistance tool. Interest in cash and voucher responses to food insecurity took off following the 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. 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.

Myth: Recipients always prefer cash to in-kind transfers. While cash and vouchers generally provide more flexibility and choice for households than food, recipient preferences depend on the context. Market access, gender of the recipient, season, risk of inflation and degree of food insecurity all shape preferences. Although studies in multiple countries have found that most food assistance recipient households prefer cash transfers over food, the opposite also holds true for important subgroups. Women who may have more control over food than cash within the household, residents of more remote or unstable regions where it may be unsafe or infeasible to expand commercial food supply, and people in inflationary economies where the real value of cash falls rapidly commonly favor in-kind transfers. Including cash transfers in the food assistance toolbox is an important advance. Donor and implementing agencies nonetheless need to guard against mistakenly assuming that cash is always best.

Myth: Corruption is more of a problem with cash than with in-kind programming. It is often claimed that cash transfers bear a greater risk of corruption than in-kind transfers. Experience does not support that claim. From arrival or purchase in the affected region to delivery to recipients, in-kind food assistance may be subject to corruption at many points. Food can be diverted at ports, where intermediaries or local officials falsify delivery quantities and spoilage and sell foods for their own gain. Lots that are rejected due to infestation by pests or disease can also be seized and sold into markets instead of being destroyed. The U.S. State Department claims that only a small share of all food delivered to Ethiopia in 2008 reached its intended recipients, in large parts due to theft.

Local purchases have also been subject to manipulation. Humanitarian workers in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s were fooled into buying bags of sand instead of grains by rebels disguised as grain traders. More recently, transporters contracted by the WFP in Somalia stole and sold nearly half of all deliveries in 2010. This sparked both international attention and protests by intended recipients in Somalia, who have called on aid agencies to engage in better end-point monitoring to ensure that the neediest receive food.

Cash transfers are also subject to corruption but it is by no means clear that they are more susceptible to corruption than other forms of food assistance. Cash is less visible than food, which may in some cases shield them from diversion, but in others may provide opportunities for theft. However, cash deliveries also tend to involve fewer intermediaries, helping limit opportunities for corruption. New technologies also help to facilitate secure delivery. Identification cards can be issued that allow recipients to access cash through formal banks using secure identification numbers. Money, and even vouchers, can also now be de-

livered via text messages to recipients' personal cell phone numbers, and then recovered with any phone credit sales agent. These technologies have been piloted successfully without reported incidents of corruption.

Corruption concerns with cash transfers can best be thought of as different from, as opposed to lesser or greater than, those associated with in-kind transfers. To avert this phenomenon, corruption concerns need to be considered carefully regardless of the form of transfer.

More nutritious commodities

The food aid basket has changed markedly in a generation. As one simple indicator, wheat and wheat flour declined from nearly 80 percent of global food aid in the 1970s to around 25 percent by 2009. This reflects both growing recognition of the diverse nutritional needs of target populations and the decline of donor country domestic farm support programs that generated large government-owned wheat stocks, which donors shipped abroad as food aid.

Fortified and blended foods have boosted the nutritional content of rations and highly nutritious ready-to-use foods have revolutionized the treatment of severe acute undernutrition. But widespread concern remains that more nutritious food aid commodities are necessarily more expensive than less nutritious bulk cereals.

Myth: More nutritious foods are always more expensive. Bulk commodities and unfortified cereals and cereal products cost less per ton than highly fortified or processed foods with enhanced nutritional value. As a result, food aid relies disproportionately on cereals over more nutritious alternatives because food assistance programs typically assess the costs of donated food commodities on a dollar-per-ton basis.

But costs can be evaluated in terms of lives saved, nutritional performance or nutrients provided. The cheapest commodity by weight is not necessarily the cheapest source of calories, nor is the cheapest source of calories necessarily the cheapest source of protein or other essential nutrients. For example, corn-soya-blend (CSB) is 14 percent more expensive than cornmeal per metric ton but only 11 percent more expensive per calorie. In terms of protein, however, CSB is actually 48 percent cheaper than cornmeal. Different cost metrics change the relative cost of different commodity choices. The most appropriate cost metric to use depends on the objectives of the program.

In a world where the need for food assistance increasingly exceeds its availability, budget-constrained donors face hard tradeoffs between feeding as many people as possible and providing higher quality foods to improve nutritional impact per person fed. As a wider range of new and/or reformulated products emerge for use in food assistance, understanding these tradeoffs becomes increasingly complex and employing cost metrics better suited towards context-specific program objectives becomes increasingly necessary. Combining improved cost metrics with better needs assessments that identify which nutrients are most needed by which target populations can lead to far greater impact in food assistance programs.

Conclusions

Continued, even growing, need for food assistance has prompted innovation in international food assistance policy and practice over the past decade. Nonetheless, lingering misconceptions limit donor and operational agency uptake of some of the newer tools of 21st century food assistance. An expanding evidence base can help dispel these myths and advance a more needs-driven and flexible global food assistance regime.

Key further reading

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Endnote

1 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. Food assistance is a somewhat broader concept encompassing 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.