

REFLECTIONS

THE CHANGING FACE OF FOOD AID

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ABSTRACT

What can be called 'modern' food aid has changed considerably in the 1990's. It has strong political, agricultural, economic and trade features. Two publications[1,2], have assessed the nature of food aid, indicated future challenges and possible role, and provided recommendations for food aid policy measures. Also highlighted is the chain of events in the last 15-20 years, pointing to the transformation of the international system as a result of political events at national and global level are addressed. Issues discussed are for example food aid in relation to human insecurity and humanitarian crisis, poverty, need

for institutional reform, World Trade Organization (WTO) and mounting globalization, World Food Program, Food Aid Convention, humanitarian law, human rights and codes of conduct with emphasis on humanitarian assistance. Food aid as a development tool is questioned, and what will happen when food aid is drying out. The books provide a comprehensive analysis and are highly recommended.

Key words: *Food aid; human security; globalization; human rights, humanitarian law.*

INTRODUCTION

Food aid as a topic has been discussed and acted upon from different angles throughout history. Food aid can be, and has been approached both from a humanitarian and a political perspective. Food aid as we know it today had its origin in the Marshall Plan designed to get Europe back on its feet after the Second World War. 'Modern' food aid has turned out to be a means with strong political, agricultural, economic and trade features, leaving human security as only one and often not even the main purpose. The history and politics of food aid have been dealt with in two books edited by Clay and Stokke, one from 1991[1] and the other published in 2000[2]. This paper is based on these books. However, the focus is on the latter book 2000b[3], since it is more relevant to the issues at hand today and points to our immediate future. The 2000[2] publication contains 16 chapters, in addition to a substantive editorial introduction. Discussed

are linkages between food aid, food security and human security, or food insecurity, within the wider concept of human insecurity. This wider concept includes both chronic threats such as repression, hunger, disease and harmful disruptions in patterns of daily life – whether in homes, in jobs, or in communities. It also traces the historical development of food aid and the present major institutional arrangements for it. Such arrangements are complex, and often strongly influenced by national aid and development policies as well as Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGOs) interests and the multilateral system.

Contextual issues are in particular important in assessing the role of future food aid, such as forces of mounting globalization, particularly in the economic field but often driven by a revolution in technology and communication. The end of an era of the old bipolar system of East - West conflict with related preferential support to the clients of the superpowers has not led to the removal of tensions and violent conflicts. On the contrary, the opposite seems to have happened. 'New' conflict patterns have surfaced: intra-state war has increased, and a

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large number of low-level conflicts, some of high intensity, have become serious threats to development and human security.

In the 2000 book issue, the food prospects of low-income countries are presented as a background for a future perspective on food aid in the next 25 years. Here, the perspective is that of the 2020 Vision of a Sustainable Future of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The world will have enough food to meet the demands of those who can afford to buy it. However, the low-income developing countries will probably not be able to generate the necessary foreign exchange to purchase needed food on the world market. We are, therefore, presumably entering an era of volatility in the world food situation[4].

The books[1-3] provide a comprehensive analysis of the past and present situation, and possible future challenges and role of food aid. It is not possible to review all the various aspects in detail. I have, therefore, selected some topics that I find especially interesting in particular in the book published in 2000, namely food aid related to humanitarian crises, poverty, the WTO processes, the Food Aid Convention, humanitarian law and human rights, and codes of conduct for humanitarian operations.

FOOD AID, HUMAN INSECURITY AND HUMANITARIAN CRISES

The editors point out that food aid should be considered in relation to food security, and that this should be seen as part of a wide concept of human security. Three chapters deal with human insecurity and humanitarian crises [5-7]. The nature of conflicts has changed and armed conflicts within states now outnumber the 'traditional' international conflicts. They point out that since the First World War, there has been a development of gradually increasing number of civilian casualties in wars, to the situation today where the distinction between civilians and combatants becomes more and more

blurred. Since the Cold War, man-made emergencies in the form of conflicts have overtaken natural calamities in creating humanitarian crises. Civilians are often the main targets but civilians are today also often active in generating and continuing violence. Internal conflicts often turn into some form of 'gang warfare' and primitive revenge processes.

This has serious consequences on the social fabric, not least on food insecurity, with resulting hunger and malnutrition – and thus the need for food aid. It is pointed out that dealing with this is complex and the *ad hoc* reactive nature of responses today is far from satisfactory. A holistic approach is needed that takes into consideration a host of factors, linking emergency relief to peacebuilding and peacekeeping, diplomacy, human rights and economic and social development activities simultaneously, so that they become mutually reinforcing for peace.

Food aid in such situations is difficult. Even with our knowledge of nutritional needs and the nutrient content of various foods, nutritional deficiencies are common in emergency camp settings [8]. Some authors point to the problems of ineffectiveness related to the decisions made at donor and multilateral agency level, inadequate resources, the tying of aid, the decision-making procedures and institutional thinking regarding policy. They call for better information exchange, evaluation and research, including on food aid procedures, policies, regulations and institutional mechanisms, emergency planning, and provisioning and program implementation.

FOOD AID AND POVERTY

In an interesting perspective from the SADC countries, the problem of poverty linked with humanitarian crisis is highlighted [7]. The authors maintain that a growing number of people are living in poverty in the region. With few assets they are vulnerable to external shock such as drought (and internal conflicts – not discussed by these authors). Without

saving or other types of coping strategies, their situation deteriorates fast in situations of shocks, leading to food insecurity, hunger and malnutrition. In spite of this the authors point to the fact that in recent years mass starvation and widespread famine in Southern Africa have receded. It seems that the nature of the humanitarian crises has been ameliorated by changes in national economic policies, by greater regional involvement in information and coordination, and by growing regional trade [7]. This stands in contrast to the media picture that the public in richer countries is presented with.

The authors call for a better understanding of the link between poverty and drought - to assess the potential role of food aid in mitigation - and more research on climatic changes and how to cope in agriculture, and how to address demographic changes including urbanization. They call for a need to reduce subsidies and change other policy distortions in the agricultural sector, to get away from what they consider unrealistic ideas of self-provisioning in rural areas. Furthermore, they call for more transparency in policy and decisions and a change in the role of the state from being a major guarantor of goods and services to that of a facilitator. How this last point can be achieved is unclear to the authors. HIV/AIDS is surprisingly not mentioned although this may be the biggest challenge that Africa south of Sahara is faced with today.

THE DECLINE IN FOOD AID AND THE LINK TO THE WTO PROCESSES

There is a decline in the quantity of food aid [9,10]. Food aid has always been more or less donor-driven, with decisions based on the level of surplus stocks in donor countries, the world prices of commodities provided as food aid, development assistance objectives, and the institutional commitments of donors. Food aid flows have been sensitive to these factors and to the changing situation in agricultural markets. The Uruguay Round and WTO processes are likely to reduce further the

structural surpluses of main foodstuffs in the major donor countries [11]. A long-term goal of the WTO is a balance between market supply and demand. If reached, this will generate fewer surpluses and may harm food-deficit countries by leading to higher prices on imported farm commodities, and their access to food aid will greatly diminish. Signs of these are already apparent since the global food aid declined by more than half from 1993 to 1996. The Bretton Woods institutions, and the WTO through the Marrakech Decision, draw attention to the role of food aid and other possible means of meeting the additional food-import cost of trade liberalization. Thus, food aid may be of less importance in the future as a general means of development.

THE ROLE OF WORLD FOOD PROGRAM

The role of World Food Program (WFP), the NGO-EU link in food aid, and food aid in development are discussed in several chapters [2]. Food aid's contribution to development is seriously questioned because, according to Pillai [12], it has little ability to reach the poorest, especially women, and has not reached the intended beneficiaries. This author maintains that food aid interventions have rarely had a demonstrably positive impact on the nutritional status of beneficiaries, except in circumstances of acute food shortage. This strongly critical view is partly supported and partly contrasted in two other chapters [10,13]. In a recent evaluation of the WFP, it is stated that the Program would continue to be a critically important and effective channel of food relief operations, well deserving of donor support [10]. In physically moving food, the WFP performs well, but as regards its development work, a disturbing number of weaknesses have been discovered. The future of and potential role of the WFP is linked to the development in the WTO with its long-term goal of a balance between market supply and demand. It is obvious that these new developments will have an impact on the Food Aid Convention agreements, but this is not

discussed. Given this, challenge to the need for governments to take a larger responsibility than before is pointed out; also that WFP assistance more than before should be to support government programs.

THE FOOD AID CONVENTION, HUMANITARIAN LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Some chapters in Clay and Stokke [2] are obviously linked, while others have links that may not seem so clear-cut. Two that are linked in a very important but less obvious way are Chapters 4 and 14 [14,15]. Chapter 4 discusses the past, present and future role of the Food Aid Convention (FAC), and Chapter 14 discusses food as a human right, and in particular developments since the 1996 World Food Summit.

Food as a human right was established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 [16], and further elaborated in the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of 1966 [17]. A major breakthrough occurred with the adoption, on 11 May 1999, of a 'General Comment' [18] on the right to adequate food by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations [15]. The FAC originated in 1967 during the Kennedy Round of GATT negotiations as a form of international burden-sharing to support food aid. The FAC is an international agreement under which signatories are legally committed to provide specified minimum tonnage, and has been seen as a safety net protecting recipient countries. It is interesting to note that the ICESCR includes in Article 11 provisions on international cooperation:

The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international cooperation based on free consent.

The FAC could play a role in international cooperation and support to poor countries, if the two instruments were linked. An analysis of such links would have been useful.

The books show clearly that food aid has been and still is donor-driven, strongly influenced by international market prices and domestic and foreign policy, and not by the food and nutritional needs of recipient countries. This remains so despite the sixth FAC meeting that resulted in a substantive revision of the Convention, including new articles on the needs of recipients. Another major problem is the lack of requirements for systematic evaluation of food aid. In a revision of the Convention, an opportunity can be provided to learn from past mistakes by making links with other international instruments such as the ICESCR, in order to make a positive nutritional impact, strengthen food security in vulnerable countries, and improve efficiency.

Benson [14] points to the need to shift the emphasis of the FAC away from a minimum quantitative commitment, towards some form of obligation based on needs of people in the recipient countries. Such a reorientation would have responded to the call for international cooperation specified in Article 11 of the ICESCR, and could have helped countries under the Covenant to meet their obligation towards their own populations. Clay and Stokke [3] point out that the FAC could be an instrument for shifting to a rights-based formulation of international responsibilities. Admittedly, there is an obvious obstacle to this in that the USA, the largest contributor to the FAC and still the major player in food aid internationally, has not ratified the ICESCR. The irony is that the USA was the driving force behind the development of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which subsequently led to the ICESCR, and also the force behind the development of the FAC.

CODES OF CONDUCT

Several chapters in Clay and Stokke [2] focus on codes of conduct relevant to food aid implementation as part of humanitarian operations. There are many such codes of conduct. Those discussed in some detail are the Food Aid Charter for the Sahel and the Code of Conduct

for disaster relief (the Sphere Project of the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies) [3, 15, 19, 20]. The Food Aid Charter focuses on process. It is a shared vision of good practice, a non-binding agreement between countries in the North and the South. The Food Aid Charter is seen as a North-South partnership that has functioned fairly well, partly because of firm institutional backing, shared interest and understanding, and mutual confidence.

The Code of Conduct for disaster relief (the Sphere Project) on the other hand is not concerned with operational details but with key issues in humanitarian aid (including food). This Code of Conduct seems not to have been able to clarify the principle division between normative dimensions and practical applications. Among the arguments are that it is too vague, does not provide guidelines on coordination, and leaves out compliance and accountability mechanisms. Another argument is that NGOs working in humanitarian assistance are very varied in their visions, goals and agendas, as well as managerial skills, knowledge and competence. There are also many diverse situations and very many stakeholders, who often operate according to an 'action first' principle; and NGOs often have a high turnover of staff. The point is made that the Code essentially emanated from the NGOs in order to guide their work and is of no help against the bad practices of governments, local authorities and warring parties.

Another code of conduct that emanated from NGOs is the draft Code of Conduct on the Human Right to Adequate Food. This was a direct response to two elements of the call for action formulated by the World Food Summit in 1996: firstly, that the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger needed to be clarified, and secondly, that particular attention should be given to the implementation and full and progressive realization of this right as a means of achieving food security for all. By 1999 more than 800 NGOs had endorsed the Code.

In this context, it is of particular importance that in addition to setting out the normative content of the right to adequate food, also give the corresponding obligations of states at the national and international level, the responsibility of international organizations, and the regulation of economic enterprises and other actors, including NGOs. This is not mentioned in the discussion of the various codes on humanitarian assistance, but is discussed by Barth Eide [15] who deals with food as a human right.

LINKS AND OVERLAP - THE NEED FOR NEW TOOLS

As pointed out by Barth Eide [15], the international human rights provide a normative basis for policy development and programming. There is a need to look closer at the link between the human rights law and humanitarian law in general, and the human right to food, the Food Aid Convention, the Food Aid Charter, the Code of Conduct on the Human Right to Adequate Food and other codes of conduct related to food, nutrition, health and livelihood. This subject is missing from the book published in 2000 [2]. The viewpoint of Clay and Stokke [3] in the last chapter is that codes of conduct for food aid are pragmatic efforts requiring agreement on a normative ranking of objectives and a shared view of processes that is empirically based. This may be one starting point in assessing the link between human rights law and humanitarian law, related to food. There are many parallel initiatives and processes. This is acceptable for a while, but can end up creating unnecessary tensions and duplication of work. The possibilities of linking the various codes of conduct and even merging parts of their content should be explored. Could this be the topic for a new workshop under the auspices of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes?

CONCLUSION

The books manage to present the chain of events in the last 15-20 years in a convincing way, pointing to the transformation of the international system as a result of political events at the national and global levels. Furthermore, they address the consequence of these changes for food security and food aid policy, and the need for fundamental institutional reforms. They provide a very interesting perspective on a complex issue, and contain much information, interesting and contrasting views and perspectives. They also demonstrate that there is much to be done to make food aid a development tool, and an instrument to help crisis-stricken and poor countries fulfil their obligation to ensure adequate food for their citizens. They raise the question of what the food aid actors will do when the source of food aid dries up and their key function is lost.

It would have been useful and interesting to have had a chapter discussing links between the FAC, the ICESCR, various codes of conduct and other international instruments. There is certainly a need to start such a process. To obtain an international consensus on this may seem remote, however, given the USA's political position over the years.

The books could play an important role in clarifying facts and theoretical conditions when international meetings and conferences engage in further deliberations on how to fight hunger, food insecurity, malnutrition and poverty, and not the least on each country's policy, choice and focus.

The books are highly recommended for anyone working on or interested in food aid, food security and related issues.

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