

Roles of Food Aid

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank's motto is "A Christian response to hunger." What is a Christian response to hunger? Why do we provide food aid?

Food has a unique role to play in relief and development programs. When planning a food aid project, it is important to understand why and how food aid is to be used. This infosheet describes some of the key roles of food aid identified by members of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

Underlying Motivation

As a coalition of Christian organizations, the Foodgrains Bank has identified two basic motivations for food aid projects: Biblical obedience and relationship & solidarity.

Biblical Obedience: Both the Old Testament (Isaiah 58:7) and the words of Jesus (Matt 25:35) call us to share our food with the hungry. For a Christian, sharing is not optional. Related to this is the witness that Christians may provide to non-Christians by the sharing of food, although this depends on the context.

Relationship & Solidarity: Food aid from the Foodgrains Bank provides opportunities to link Canadian communities and churches with communities and churches in areas where the food is used. By providing a symbolic and concrete demonstration of solidarity with those suffering hunger and food insecurity, food aid can act as a witness to God's love and compassion.

Strategic Roles of Food Aid

While these underlying motivations view food aid as a *faithful* response, there are also some key roles of food aid that reflect a *strategic* response to hunger and food insecurity. These strategic roles are associated with measurable outcomes that the food aid is intended to achieve. The Foodgrains Bank has identified four key roles for food aid projects: health and nutrition, food security, community building, and peace and justice.

Health and Nutrition

One of the more obvious roles of food aid is in improving health and nutrition. It is often assumed that providing food will improve the nutritional status of the people that receive it, and this may occur. However, food aid does not automatically mean that people are eating more or better food. While this may be the case, food may also be sold or it may simply replace other food that the household or

individuals would otherwise have purchased. Differences in the way food is distributed within the household (e.g. more food given to boys than to girls etc.) may mean that some people do not eat more as a result of food distribution. It may be necessary to assess whether people are actually eating more or if they are eating better (improvements in the nutritional quality of the diet, micronutrients etc.).

Even if people are eating more, or better, they may not have better nutrition. Diseases (especially diarrhea in children) affect people's ability to eat, and the body's ability to absorb nutrients from the food. In order to assess whether nutritional status has improved, it may be necessary to evaluate outcomes like body size (see *tips* 204 for information on height and weight indicators) or activity levels (when people are well nourished, they are better able to work, play and engage in community activities).

Improved nutrition may also lead to reductions in illness. Assessments may focus on reductions in clinical malnutrition (cases of kwashiorkor or marasmus), fewer cases of micronutrient deficiencies (vitamin A

night blindness, goitre, anemia etc.), decreases in rates of infectious disease, such as diarrhea and respiratory ailments, or fewer malnutrition-associated deaths.

Food aid may help to slow the deterioration of health and nutrition in an emergency such as a drought, conflict, or natural disaster. It may also reduce seasonal malnutrition in areas where a "lean season" is common. Or, it may contribute to sustainable improvements in nutritional status in areas of chronic malnutrition. Food aid may also be used to treat seriously malnourished individuals in therapeutic feeding programs. Treating a malnourished child may have effects on growth and development that last a lifetime.

While improving health and nutrition is an important role for food aid, it is only part of the picture. Food aid may have important effects that go beyond improvements in health and nutrition.

Food Security

Food aid can reduce or relieve the pressure that people experience during times of food shortage. This role is mainly economic; hunger can affect what people do with their assets and how they produce or acquire food (see *tips* 302 on assessing vulnerability). Food aid can improve food security by protecting and building livelihoods.

The Foodgrains Bank has identified two underlying motivations for food aid:

- **Biblical Obedience**
- **Relationship & Solidarity**

and four strategic roles:

- **Health and Nutrition**
- **Food Security**
- **Community Building**
- **Peace Building & Justice**

Protecting Livelihoods: When faced with food shortage, people often do things to get food in the short term that actually harm their ability to feed themselves in the long term. For instance, people desperate to get food may sell off their livestock, sell their farming equipment, eat their seed, or leave their lands and communities in search of temporary employment or food. Providing food to people at such times can help them to feed themselves without harming their long-term food security.

Building Livelihoods: In addition to protecting livelihoods, food aid may also support the creation of assets that help people to cope with seasonal fluctuations and unexpected events. Assets may include land improvement, roads, water supply, or housing improvements (often through food-for-work). Improvements in soil structure, forestry, and biodiversity may all lead to improved food security. Food may also be used to promote training or educational programs focused on agricultural and economic development (e.g. sustainable agriculture techniques or marketing skills).

Protecting and building livelihoods can help to make communities less *sensitive* to food shortages and more *resilient* – better able to recover after periods of food insecurity.

Community Building

Food aid projects may also help to encourage community participation and strengthen community groups. Involving marginalized people in the planning and implementation of food aid projects can provide opportunities for empowerment and participation. Some of the outcomes may include increased participation in local co-operative groups, increased involvement of community members in decision-making processes, or increased opportunities for women. While these may be a consequence of any participatory development project, the process of organizing a food aid project is concrete and easily understood by most people. Thus, such projects are particularly effective ways to build community capacity.

Food aid may also be used to increase the local sense of ownership of a development project. An organization in India has observed that some communities view food as an *incentive* to help them complete projects for themselves, rather than a *wage* to do work for the donor agency's benefit.

Providing adequate food in a culturally appropriate and participatory way can reverse the degrading psychological effects of hunger and poverty. Food aid can play an important role in promoting the dignity and humanity of beneficiaries.

Peace & Justice

A Liberian proverb says, “a hungry man is an angry man.” Hunger can cause conflict, just as conflict is a major source of hunger. In conflict situations, people's livelihoods are destroyed and they are often forced to flee; sometimes enemies deliberately withhold food.

Providing valuable resources in resource-poor areas can create or feed tension and conflict. Food aid is no exception. Food aid programs should carefully consider the effects on local tensions and should seek to “do no harm” (see tips 402 on the risks of food aid).

However, just as food may be used as a weapon of war, it can also be a tool for peace. Food can be used as a weapon only where there is hunger. By providing food to the vulnerable, food aid can reduce the power of food as a military or economic weapon. When used in ways that promote justice and equity, food aid can reduce the threat of violence. Food aid can also respond to victims of conflict – especially refugees and displaced people. When offered to all in need without taking sides, food aid may open doors for mediation between warring people. Food aid can also be used to rebuild and rehabilitate communities following conflict, and to strengthen reconciliation and demobilization efforts.

In addition, food aid can be used to demonstrate a “culture of peace.” Food is a powerful symbol – as demonstrated around the world in the importance of sharing meals and, in the Christian tradition, the sacrament of communion. By sharing food with traditional enemies and oppressed groups, and opposing the use of food as a political weapon (in sanctions or blockades), food aid can promote peace building and justice. This always requires creativity and sensitivity to the local context.

Once it is clear what roles food plays in a given food program, it is possible to ask whether food actually fulfills those roles, and how it may be used more effectively. This is the starting point for evaluation.

Resources

For more information on the roles of food aid or any other planning, monitoring, and evaluation issues, contact the Canadian Foodgrains Bank at the address below, or email inquiries to cfgb@foodgrainsbank.ca