Food aid and relief-development strategies*

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This paper begins by setting out the main arguments on which a proposal for "relief-development strategies" rest. The second part of the paper is concerned with a discussion of the way the objectives of a "relief-development strategy" might be achieved and the roles emergency food aid might have. In the third part of the paper, a number of strategic issues are discussed. A stylized account is presented of how a broad "relief development strategy" might be mounted. The last part of the paper draws together the discussion by considering how emergency projects should be assessed. If the principles on which this paper are based are accepted, then the evaluation of emergency projects should extend well beyond convention.

Key words: Food aid; Disaster relief; Development; Evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

The 1980's have tragically demonstrated the vulnerability of African families to famine. Indeed it is arguable that they are more vulnerable now than they were ten years ago despite massive development efforts. The real tragedy is that Africa's food crisis could have been, and was, predicted. Yet, it was not prevented. Furthermore, even after a massive injection of foreign emergency assistance, the conditions which generated it remain virtually unchanged. This being the case, the vast amount of emergency food aid that has been provided to African countries south of the Sahara is unlikely to have a significant beneficial effect on the long-term future of the families most at risk. Indeed, it may well be that emergency food aid is keeping alive families that have little chance of an independent economic future. In this sense, emergency food aid may actually be increasing future risk of famine.

The main purpose of this paper is to examine the feasibility of using food aid during a period of famine not only to sustain life but also, and at the same time, to address the obvious, and arguably increasing, vulnerability of African families to periodic starvation.

The paper's point of departure is the assertion that the primary cause of famine is not drought. If it were, famine would have ravaged Australia in 1983 as it used to ravage South Asia and China in the 1970s. It suggests instead that the vulnerability of African families to famine lies primarily in their susceptibility to income collapse. This occurs when income fluctuations cannot be stabilized by inter-household transfers or the liquidation of household assets; and the ability to maintain an adequate level of demand for food is lost (Sen, 1981).

Employment and income are therefore central issues to this analysis. Furthermore, this paper argues that increasing agricultural labour productivity is not enough to provide adequate and stable levels of income for those families most at risk. The conclusions are therefore that international resource transfers must be directed to stimulating investment processes leading to sustained rises in rural incomes from non-agricultural as well as agricultural sources.

This implies a broadly based "relief-development strategy" that discriminates between the risks to income collapse which different groups of households face and which makes the most of the energy and vitality of African peasant families to invest in their survival. The paper argues that this strategy should dominate the allocation of international emergency resources and that the provision of emergency food aid is a vital part of such a strategy.

However, the viability of the strategy proposed here rests on two critical assumptions. The first is that African families are willing to invest in their future and are able to make sensible choices. The second is that communities have the capacity to organize the implementation of projects which incorporate these objectives. A few small-scale community projects are unlikely to make an impact. The need is too great. What is required is a multitude of small-scale activities, of great range and diversity, spread throughout areas prone to drought. The scale required is well beyond the capacity of any government to implement by conventional means. The only feasible alternative is to make a "leap of faith," which many will find difficult, and to place the resources required in the hands of communities themselves.

Furthermore, even if these assumptions are valid, there are a number of other issues which would have to be tackled if food aid could be used to support activities of this kind. These include the perceptions of food aid donors about the nature and causes of famine which dictate the rules under which emergency food aid is distributed, the delays in having food aid and other resources on the ground in time to prevent widespread social and economic dislocation and the willingness of government agencies to support community programmes which might utilize food aid to its best advantage.
THE ARGUMENT FOR RELIEF-DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

The argument for proposing a “relief-development strategy” has four main strands. The first is that people who are prone to famine typically operate in an environment of uncertainty and the risks they face can be specified. The second is that, although this uncertainty shows up most obviously in unpredictable inter-seasonal and inter-annual fluctuations in agricultural output, it is actually fluctuations in household income which limit a household’s ability to maintain a stable level of demand for food. If a downturn in income becomes irreversible, people die from starvation. The implication is that, while it is important to reduce the variations in household output, it is even more important to increase the level of household income and to reduce its instability. The third strand to the argument is that if the main goal is a reduction in the risk to famine, and if resources are scarce, then the expansion of household income, a reduction in its variability, or both should absorb a substantial amount of time, effort and the resources available. The argument is completed by the assertion that this is a possible, indeed a necessary, use of emergency resources. These priorities are not incompatible with life-saving measures which address immediate problems. In this context, a dual role can be assigned to food aid which enhances both its “emergency” and its “development” functions.

The nature of the threat to household incomes and employment

All households operate in an environment of uncertainty. In most industrialized countries, a great deal of effort has gone into creating safety-nets under the most important risks to livelihood. Social security and insurance schemes act by shifting the risks of forced unemployment, a temporary collapse in income and the needs of old-age from individual households onto public and large private institutions. Families in Africa bear these risks themselves.

Rural households, and people in the cities who have no formal employment, face greater risks than most because they operate a household economy in an environment of great uncertainty from which they have little protection — other than the obligations of kinship, which should not be underestimated. If income collapses to the point when the family can no longer afford to buy food then the family starves.

Two main sets of conditions lie behind most famines — low average levels of household income and large variations in household income. Both can be illustrated by typical conditions in much of the African countryside.

Variations in agricultural incomes

Farmers and pastoralists all over the world know that production in any given year is uncertain. Crop yields may be affected by the weather, by crop pests or by crop diseases. Grazing is absolutely dependent on the season’s rainfall. As a result, annual crop and animal production, and the income* it generates, fluctuate around an “average,” better in some years, worse in others. African peasant farmers are exposed to greater than usual fluctuations in agricultural income, first, because they rely almost entirely on rain-fed agriculture and second, because year-to-year variations in rainfall are greater in Sub-Saharan Africa than anywhere else in the world outside the Middle East (Valdes, 1981). In addition, agricultural income is highly seasonal in nature, being almost entirely tied to a single or, at the most double, annual crop.

The significance of stocks

However, neither interseasonal nor interannual fluctuations in income would matter very much if a family had access to stocks on which they could draw in order to maintain a level of current household income sufficient for their necessities, including food. It is generally possible for peasant farming families to maintain food stocks to tide them over seasons when inflows of income are low, although the “hungry season” is a well known feature of life in many rural areas.

However, families find it much more difficult to accumulate sufficient stocks to carry them over poor years. This requires that income must be sufficient in good years for household needs and for some savings that can be put aside against the possibility of crop failure.

The problem facing a household attempting to maintain “food security” is exactly the same problem facing a country attempting to maintain national food security. In addition to the need for accumulation in good years, the costs of stocking commodities have to be set against the probability that stocks will run out and the family will face destitution.

At very low levels of income, the main problem is one of accumulation. Even in good years, there may not be sufficient output to permit any savings. As income begins to rise, the problem becomes one of strategy. What level of stocks should be held? In what form? It may be better to sell in good years, for example, and to accumulate money rather than to store grain which is prone to deterioration and loss from pests and disease.

Animals form the basis of a common and efficient stocking strategy for many African farmers including, of course, pastoralists. Animal stocks do not deteriorate with time; indeed they multiply. Provided a poor year is not too catastrophic so that animal prices fall, they can be sold in years when crop income falls to stabilize household income and support a stable level of demand for food.

*“Income” means both cash income derived from sales and the value of commodities retained for consumption by the farmer’s family.
Stock-income relationships

This line of reasoning suggests that three elements dominate household food security. The first is the average level of household income. The second is the magnitude and probability of seasonal and annual fluctuations around this average. The third is the value of stocks a household can maintain and the form in which they are held.

These three factors are inter-related. Low incomes not only endanger current food consumption but also reduce the possibility of accumulating food security stocks. As income rises, both the amount and the proportion of income available for savings also rises. Current consumption is thus assured and the possibility for building up food security stocks also increases. The value of stocks required to achieve food security depends on both the probability of variation and its magnitude. If income is stable, assuming it is adequate, there is very little need to hold stocks. As the probability and the magnitude of fluctuations increase, the value of adequate stocks must also increase.

Low-income families therefore face a double jeopardy. First, low average household income, close to the “famine level,” does not allow the accumulation of a surplus in good years. Therefore families who are unable to accumulate much from current output are at more risk than those who produce enough in most years to more than fulfill their consumption requirements. Second, families whose income varies with large amplitudes from year to year in comparison with average income are more at risk than those whose income is relatively more stable.

Many families in Africa have a low long-term average income and, in addition, face large inter-seasonal and inter-annual income fluctuations. These families are the most at risk to famine.

Off-farm employment and income

Although the bulk of rural incomes in Africa are derived from farming, it would be a mistake to imagine that African families have no access to other sources of livelihood. Some members of the family may spend part of the year in wage labour; some in petty trading and some in family-based industry such as beer-brewing and food processing.

In addition, many African families have a member employed in the city and depend to a large extent on this source of income to maintain food security. Furthermore, kinship ties frequently involve obligations to assist when times are hard. The importance of these intra- and inter-household transfers should not be underestimated. In Botswana, for example, one estimate (Eele and Funk, 1985) suggests that the demand for food in rural areas increased to replace lost “food income” by 40% during drought years. This probably also occurred to a lesser extent in Kenya in 1984. In both cases, the main source of the “new income” was remittances from family members working in the towns and cities or, in the case of Botswana, in South Africa.

Having said this, by comparison, say, with Latin America or South Asia, rural African families are much more dependent on farming incomes or income directly relating to agriculture. Rural industries and services are poorly developed and offer little opportunities for employment. This increases the vulnerability of the rural economy as a whole to the effects of sharp declines in agricultural income and makes rural families more susceptible to irreversible income collapse.

Secular declines in income and employment

There is considerable evidence to suggest that rural incomes in Africa are declining and the number of people who are unable to earn an adequate income is increasing. Although there has been a good deal of publicity recently about declining levels of per capita food production in Sub-Saharan Africa, the evidence for this is rather slight. Much less is said about secular declines in income and employment which is, by far, the more important issue.

Neither rising nor falling aggregate food output is necessarily significant with respect to household food security. Many, if not most families, and indeed most countries, do not produce all the food their people eat. What matters most is whether or not people earn enough money to buy the food they need to eat but do not produce.

It is therefore most significant that such circumstantial evidence as exists tends to suggest that there has been a decline in the value of incomes and that opportunities for alternative off-farm employment are contracting relative to population growth. If this is the case, it pinpoints precisely why the risk of famine in Africa may be increasing.

Unfortunately, hard data about rural incomes and employment are even more difficult to come by than reliable agricultural output data. However, there are at least three pieces of evidence which support the impression that both income and employment opportunities are declining in Africa.

The first is that population growth exceeds the capacity of any economic sector to provide work for new entrants to the labour force. If we assume that the potential labour force is increasing by 3% per annum, that the elasticity of demand for labour is around 0.5 for typical agricultural activities, farming and the like, and that (optimistically) there is equal access for everyone to new jobs, this would mean that a sustained increase in the value of agricultural output of 6% per annum would be required just to absorb new labour force entrants. This is well above the most optimistic estimates of the performance of agricultural sectors in countries south of the Sahara.

The second piece of evidence comes from internal migration patterns. It is clear that many people in drought-prone areas of Africa do not see the future of their families to be in farming. The high premium placed on education to prepare children for wage and salaried employment suggests that people are prepared to take great risks and to live in appalling conditions around cities waiting for formal employment. Urban growth rates in Africa in the last decade or so are the highest in the world. All this suggests that people are “voting with their feet” against farming as a viable means of earning a living and that they see the risks

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of seeking alternative employment to be less than the risks they face farming. Of course they may be wrong but it is hard to find convincing arguments that they are.

Thirdly there is the evidence from the relationships between land and the African rural population. The African countryside is commonly described as “land abundant, labour abundant and capital scarce.” The last two features are undoubtedly correctly described. However, the first requires qualification and out of this qualification arises further evidence of secular declines in rural livelihoods.

In the first place, land of good quality, capable of producing reliably from rainfall is not as abundant as it is often thought to be. A major study of land capability (United Nations, 1982) suggests that, although the combined natural resources of the fifty-one countries in Africa could feed 50% more than their population projected for the year 2000, the population of twenty-two of them had already exceeded the potential carrying capacity of the land at low (and probably existing) levels of technology in 1975, and twenty-eight would be in this position in the year 2000 if the level of technology were not raised. Furthermore, even if it were raised to “intermediate levels,” thirteen would remain unable to feed their people in the year 2000. The study did not consider the distribution of food demand but assumed that no trading occurred and that within each unit of analysis everyone would be provided with an equal share, just enough to fulfil their biological food requirements. These are grossly unrealistic assumptions and, if corrected, would make already gloomy results even more gloomy.

In the second place, even if land potential could be fully realized, the nature of African society means that people do not move freely. The assumption that they can and do is absolutely critical to a full utilization of natural resource potential. The reality is more often that ethnic or other barriers confine people to over-populated areas where considerable inputs of labour and capital would be required to raise levels of land productivity to a point which would provide reasonable incomes for the people farming the land. There is an abundance of labour but a great scarcity of capital. In its absence, the capacity of the land to yield is eroded and exhausted. These over-populated areas of Africa in many cases are also those most prone to drought and to famine because the incomes of families who farm the land are too low to allow the necessary accumulation of stocks with which to buffer income fluctuations.

The magnitude of these problems has been masked by a series of good years enjoyed by many countries in Africa between 1977 and 1981. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the recent drought has resulted in a sharp increase in “permanent” rural unemployment in the worst affected areas and countries. Botswana and Northern Ethiopia come to mind as examples. Although every recorded drought has resulted in migration to local towns and cities by a group of people who have been put out of farming permanently, the scale of the problem now is unprecedented and it is not unreasonable to suggest that there is increasing “structural” unemployment in many parts of rural Africa which has been exacerbated by the recent drought.

For this reason it is not enough to assume that “everything will go back to normal” when the rainy seasons have re-established themselves. The “crisis” (an employment crisis rather than a food crisis according to this analysis) will continue until households at risk find secure sources of employment and income.

Incomes and employment must therefore be at the centre of a “relief-development strategy” and, while investment directed at increasing agricultural land and labour productivity remains important, for many of the most vulnerable families, a secure livelihood must be sought outside agriculture. This implies a radical shift in relief (and development) priorities. A major effort is urgently required to diversify sources of rural income and create rural economies in which agriculture is linked with rural services and industries.

The main elements of a “relief-development strategy”

The general conclusions which arise from this analysis suggest that a strategy that purports to address the causes as well as the effects of famine should attempt to achieve simultaneously a number of results. First, income is required urgently by families who face irreversible income collapse.

Second, there is a need to pursue objectives related to one or more of the following:

- a sustained increase in average household income;
- a decrease in interannual variations in household income;
- an increase in the value of household stocks.

In general, therefore, emergency strategies, which are designed to have a permanent effect, will combine a transfer of income to families short of food to meet immediate needs, with support for one or more of the following elements:

- investment at the household level which makes it possible for the most vulnerable families to sustain a more stable food consumption pattern within years and between years;
- investment in the provision of new and better skills to create greater opportunities for families to diversify their sources of income;
- investment in economic and social assets at the community level of a kind which will generate flows of benefits to the most vulnerable families.

The main argument pursued in this paper is that it is possible to use international resources, and food aid in particular, to address immediate needs and also and at the same time to further these long-run objectives.

The traditional “relief-rehabilitation-development” sequence is not an appropriate framework within which to construct and implement a strategy of this kind. In the first
place, it is wasteful of resources as the bulk is inevitably allocated to the “relief” phase with little or no consideration of the underlying problems. Opportunities for preserving life and reducing the threat of future famines at the same time are thereby lost.

Secondly, “rehabilitation” generally means the replacement of lost household assets. The presumption is that the restoration of the ante status quo is all that is required. This is not so.

Third, the “relief-rehabilitation-development” strategy fails to utilize most effectively the single most abundant resource available during a famine, that is, labour. Indeed, although the availability of surplus labour is both a consequence of famine and one of the main reasons for it, it also represents an opportunity to be grasped and turned to the maximum use. For a fuller discussion of these points see Morris (1975) and McAlpine (1985). The most graphic symbols of famine, relief camps, representing as they do government and international impotence to prevent the worst of human suffering, also indicate the extent to which rural labour and skills become unemployed when household income collapses.

A failure to grasp this opportunity constitutes an inefficient use of national and international emergency resource transfers. Emergency assistance that addresses life-saving objectives alone might be justified if “drought and income collapse” were temporary, “one-off” and unusual events. But this is not so in Africa. History shows that famines are periodic events as long as levels of development remain low. The analysis presented here suggests that people in the African countryside are becoming more vulnerable to the effects of drought. It is therefore as necessary to reverse this secular trend as it is to address life-threatening circumstances. We argue here that strategies to address short and long run objectives simultaneously, far from being incompatible, are mutually reinforcing.

DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES IN AN EMERGENCY CONTEXT

A joint relief-development approach

The joint “relief-development strategy” proposed here focusses on creating opportunities for unemployed labour to work in productive ways which result in the types of investment required to enhance household food security. The resources for this investment must come largely from the people themselves. The strength of the strategy is that it achieves more than one objective at the same time. It utilizes the resource which is most abundant — household labour; it addresses the most immediate effect of famine which is an overwhelming increase in the number of unemployed people; it creates the possibility for transferring income to support failing household food demand by payments made for the work done; and it prevents nutritional deterioration, if put in place early enough.

Moreover, if relief of this kind is provided in time and to people where they live, it should prevent the social and economic disintegration which accompanies mass migration for food, the dependency on emergency aid and the unacceptable conditions of relief camps where all too frequently deterioration is so advanced that people are virtually unemployable.

Although this strategy depends on payment for work, it differs in a number of significant respects from conventional public works schemes. In the first place, to be effective in the long run, the work done must create productive or social assets whose benefits are enjoyed by the most vulnerable families. An example may help to clarify this point. The income paid to a person who works to clear the land of a large farm may prevent his family from starving, but the benefits derived from the cleared land will flow to the owner of the land, who is not likely to be most at risk to famine. Although the income from public works schemes will meet a very real need if it makes a significant contribution to maintaining food demand, the better effect will be derived if income transfers can be made efficiently to households most at risk and if the work they do makes a lasting contribution to their own household food security.

This raises a number of serious questions about the choice of projects which fulfill the criteria set out here. It is true that Africa needs more roads, water sources, markets and forests, but it is more difficult to decide who will benefit first and most from many of these amenities. It is unlikely that the resources available to pay for the work done will be sufficient to achieve everything and, in order to meet the criteria appropriate to emergency-development projects some hard choices may have to be made.

A second way in which this strategy may differ from a conventional public works programme is that although some projects may be best organized at a community level, the criteria for maximum effectiveness in an emergency context admits to the possibility that people will be paid to improve their own assets — particularly land, but also personal skills — and that the most important contribution will be the mobilization of community labour to get work done that a single family would be unable to do alone.

A third distinction is that a major part of the investment should be designed to yield rapid returns. This is essential if the investment is to result in immediate protection from future income collapse.

A fourth way in which this strategy differs from the usual public works scheme is that it should be designed to expand rural skills. We should not be under the impression that the only thing people in the African countryside know how to do is to farm. This is not true. There is an enormous variety of skills available — masons, carpenters and artisans of every kind. Relief-development strategies should result in these skills being improved and transferred to others. If, sadly, relief camps are inevitable, they constitute an opportunity, which has been virtually ignored, for providing training (including improvements in literacy and numeracy) in skills which are economically and socially useful.
This paper argues that a diversification of the rural economy is essential if the massive and increasing rural underemployment and unemployment that makes people vulnerable to famine is to be reduced. A relief-development strategy would be incomplete if it did not make a contribution to creating new, economically viable, opportunities for people to earn a living. We return to this point in due course but it should be noted here that people found in relief camps have reached a point where they are prepared to leave their only source of livelihood in search of food. We have argued that drought and population pressure are imposing structural changes on the rural economy. This line of reasoning suggests that many people, particularly those who live in areas prone to repeated drought and who leave home in search of food, are those whose livelihood will remain in jeopardy unless they find other work to supplement and stabilize, perhaps even replace, the income they earn from farming.

Fifth, therefore, "relief-development strategies" should result in new, economically viable, opportunities to earn a living in the countryside. The flow of emergency resources into an area affected by famine constitutes an important opportunity to provide capital for setting up new small-scale industrial activities.

This is not the place to define in detail what these should be, although they will certainly be mainly related to agriculture and will supply wage goods and services for which there is reason to believe demand will increase rapidly as rural incomes rise (see Mellor, 1986). The potential opportunities are endless. People can learn to be artisans, masons, carpenters, shoe repairers. They can learn to repair and maintain tools and farm implements. They can learn to build houses and stores. They can learn to make bricks and other construction material. They can learn to be nurserymen (and women). They can learn how to design and construct small irrigation schemes for their own farms and those of their neighbours. This does not necessarily mean that large numbers of expatriate experts will be required. Many of the skills will be found in the affected communities or nearby.

Finally, the strategy proposed here differs from the conventional one in that the choice of activities and the organization of the work will need to be primarily in the hands of the affected communities. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the scale of the problem is so great that it is beyond the capacity of any government or voluntary or international agency to organize and manage. The second is that if one takes a broad view of the processes which bring about change (and here we are speaking of the fundamental changes in the structure of the rural economy required to generate protection against famine) then changes which are "successful" generally arise from the initiative of the people facing the problem. It is true that they may need outside resources and outside ideas, but fundamentally solutions arise from within communities.

The strategy being proposed here is only valid if local wisdom, initiative and organizational skills exist and only feasible if they can be mobilized. It is based on the belief they do and can. It proposes to hand over resources to communities with simple but minimum administrative control to use in the ways they think best. This requires a "leap of faith" that many will find difficult. However, the alternative may be "too little too late" solutions of little real value.

Three caveats

Emergency assistance which mobilizes labour should not result in a diversion of labour from essential agricultural tasks. Projects should generally be sited within the communities where people live. This will almost always be true anyway if the long-term benefits of the assets created by them are to be enjoyed by people at risk from famine. Moreover, the projects should either be completed before the season when people are fully occupied on their farms, or be organized so that they can be interrupted to allow people to work their land. If relief assistance results in new employment opportunities which are permanent, these should employ labour which is surplus to agricultural requirements. This may be either work which can go on during slack agricultural seasons or employ people who are genuinely underemployed throughout the year.

Second, this strategy does not exclude entirely the need for income transfers by food grants. It is probable that labour scarce households (particularly those with large numbers of children compared with adults) will require income supplements which may well take the form of food supplements. For a discussion of the imaginative drought relief scheme in Botswana, see Hay et al. (1985).

Third, the strategy does not imply wholesale grants to local communities without control. Nor does it imply that no attention will be given to sound design, technical feasibility and economic viability. Neither does it imply that "outsiders" have no place at all, although their role is likely to be very different from either that of a "city-based" advisor or of many expatriate emergency teams. There may be a need for technical or management advice but more often the need is to ensure that all feasible options have been explored. The need is for an expansion of the horizons of possibility and therefore of choice.

Priorities for relief-development activities

The three technical objectives which dominate this discussion have already been specified: increased income, more stable income and increases in the value of the stock of household assets. It is, of course, not possible to specify every case for which activities are going to show the highest returns with respect to these objectives — although some examples are offered in due course. However, it is possible to suggest some guidelines.

Three common situations will be encountered.

The first arises from a collapse in agricultural incomes in an area where it is feasible to increase or stabilize agriculture incomes or both by investment in land improvement and technological change. In this case the
clear priority is to mobilize labour for land clearing, terracing, drainage, the construction of small-scale irrigation systems and the like.

The second arises from a collapse in agricultural incomes in an area where land is scarce and, despite improvements in land and labour productivity, it is unlikely that employment and incomes can be secured from agriculture alone for the most vulnerable families. The priority in this case is to identify families or individuals whose future can only be secured if they have access to alternative sources of income. While resources may usefully be employed in measures to improve land productivity, attention should be given to the provision of new skills and the start-up capital for new enterprises with strong links to agriculture.

The third poses the most problems. Here agriculture does not provide a stable source of income and employment for the majority of the people. This may have arisen as a result of poor land endowments, land degradation or increasing population pressure on scarce land resources. Many economists would argue that migration is the only and best answer. Others would propose resettlement programmes. The first may not be the answer because labour movements are constrained by ethnic boundaries. The second has an extremely poor record of success. However, a "relief-development strategy" must address the difficult issues involved. Retraining for non-agricultural employment may be possible in some cases and this may relieve the pressure on land resources sufficiently for sustained agricultural recovery to be initiated. However, in many cases the problems may be almost intractable.

**The role of emergency food aid in a “relief-development strategy”**

It should be clear from everything that has gone before that food is not the only, or even the most important, input required to implement the kind of strategy proposed here. Moreover, it is now being increasingly recognized that food and non-food inputs need to be supplied and applied in an emergency context with considerably more co-ordination than has been common in the past. The question which forms the basis of this section is, what particular role does food aid have in the implementation of a “relief-development strategy?”

In general, emergency food aid may be used to serve two functions. First, it can be used as the equivalent of an income transfer to households facing income collapse. Second, it can finance, or partly finance, relief-development activities. In both cases the main aim should be to stimulate the demand for food. In neither case should its use result in an excess of supply over demand. Thus, emergency food aid should only be used if “supply failure” is part of the overall picture.

Furthermore, it is preferable to exchange imported food aid for locally purchased food if this is available. This helps to maintain demand for locally produced food and may result in major savings in transport costs.

Table 1 summarizes the various interlocking objectives which may need to be addressed and indicates some of the means by which they might be pursued. It is unnecessary to belabour each and every point implied by Table 1 but some of the issues which are particularly relevant to the use of emergency food aid will be discussed briefly.

**Income transfers: Food or cash**

A conventional use of emergency food aid, indeed the most common use by far, is the provision of dietary supplements for hungry people. In extreme circumstances these may be the main, or even the only, source of food for starving families. Special foods are frequently provided for children, pregnant or lactating women and the severely malnourished.

The discussion so far has barely touched upon these important actions and seemingly relegates them to a vague economic notion of “income transfers.” Nevertheless, this is what they are, to the extent that a family will treat a gift of food or a gift of cash in much the same way.

Arguably the value of food aid should be measured in terms of its local market value. Whether or not families regard new cash income and new “food income” in exactly the same way is open to question. It may be, for example, that food grants are treated in much the same way as “food income” derived from household production and cash

### Table 1. Integrated emergency-development objectives

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<td>Income transfers to households</td>
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<td>Temporary employment</td>
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<td>Defence of rural terms of trade</td>
<td>Animal-grain exchange</td>
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<td>Other support to peasant terms of trade</td>
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<td>Support for market supply if necessary</td>
<td>Food sales in local markets</td>
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<td>Food sales in national market</td>
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<td><strong>Long-term</strong></td>
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<td>Investment in household economic assets</td>
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<td>New storage facilities</td>
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<td>Training in new skills</td>
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<td>Start-up capital for new enterprises</td>
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<td>Investment in community economic assets</td>
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<td>New schools</td>
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</table>

**Disasters/** 10/4/1986
grants are treated in much the same way as additional cash income derived from wages.

We need to know much more about this in the context of African emergency assistance because a critical question affecting both food aid grants to households and food aid used as wages in work projects, is the relative efficiency of food and cash in making income transfers to households under pressure.

A conventional relief strategy would be content to see that food transfers result in adequate food intake. A "relief-development strategy" has more ambitious objectives. It is concerned to see the extent to which income transfers permit households to invest. There is a growing amount of evidence to suggest that they do — even out of income transfers provided for survival. A question of particular importance in the context of a "relief-development strategy" is therefore whether cash or food transfers result in greater investment by recipient households.

As one might imagine, the evidence is sparse. However, data collected from evaluations of a "cash-for-food" project in Ethiopia (RRC, 1985; Kumar, 1985) suggest that cash income supplements result in greater allocations to investment by recipient households than do food supplements. Furthermore, these data also suggest that food supplements result in higher rates of nutritional recovery than do cash supplements. If this is true it is explicable on the grounds that families (or the senior male in the family) decide to forego current consumption even if it places the families' children at nutritional risk in order to secure the families' long-term future.

The variety of investment noted by the Ethiopian project evaluation was astonishing, particularly considering the difficult nutritional circumstances in which the families concerned were living — agricultural tools and equipment, tools for repairing implements, new animal stock and even spinning and weaving equipment. This is a very encouraging example which supports the viability of the type of joint "relief-development strategy" proposed.

Wages: Food or cash

The most obvious role for food aid in a "relief-development strategy" is its use as a commodity wage since labour-intensive activities with high investment content constitute the centrepiece of the strategy.

In fact, there is a strong case to be made for using cash rather than food as wages on at least two grounds. The first is that, within some African cultures at least, cash has a different and clearer cultural identity. Food is generally a gift from a friend or close relative. Neither government nor international agencies generally qualify as "friends." Cash, on the other hand, is well-recognized as payment for work and carries with it a different set of obligations. Second, the uses of food may be restricted. This may be the intention of some food aid donors if nutritional considerations overwhelm economic ones, but no-one should be surprised to find relief food and seed being sold on local markets. Indeed, the relative benefits of the cash-food alternative may simply depend on the ease with which food can be exchanged for cash or for other goods and services locally.

However, this does not mean that food aid cannot be used to support these activities. If the "restoration" of food demand is likely to result in an excess of demand over supply, it is most important that this is anticipated and that food is supplied in the local market. An obvious way to use food aid is to sell it and use the proceeds to pay cash wages. Nonetheless, this use has its limits. The value of the food supplied will always exceed the increase in the demand for food as some of the new income households gain from wages will be used to purchase non-food items. Thus, sooner or later, food aid used in this way will result in supply exceeding demand and depressed prices to the detriment of local food producers.

Food aid is therefore likely to provide valuable but incomplete support for "relief-development strategy" activities of this kind. Financial support is also likely to be required in many cases.

Sales of emergency food aid: Supply failure or demand failure

Many people view the sales of emergency food aid with distaste — or even with alarm. This view tends to restrict the use of food aid as a general resource with broad applications and limits its support for the kinds of activities central to a "relief-development strategy." There are situations where the sale of emergency food aid is most desirable. In some cases national food deficits may constitute a claim on food aid. In others, local shortages may need to be corrected, although in this case it is almost always better to sell imported food centrally and to provide an equivalent value of domestically produced food in local markets if that is possible. In other cases, food aid should not be supplied at all. The following line of reasoning may help to clarify this.

If famine, as is argued here, is primarily the result of a failure in the demand for food at the household level, then the primary role of relief aid should be to restore that demand. If the supply of food to meet demand, including this "restored demand," can be maintained from national production or imports, the original situation might reasonably be described as pure "demand failure." Provided household demand can be restored and the marketing or public distribution system responds adequately, there is nothing more which needs to be done — in theory at least. There is no need for food aid and certainly no need to sell it. Indeed, imports of food aid would result in oversupply and unnecessary storage costs.

However, frequently food supply relative to demand is impaired and this can reasonably be described as "supply failure." The almost inevitable result of a failure of supply relative to demand is an increase in food prices which erodes the purchasing power of poorer households.

Supply failure can occur in one or more of three ways. First, it may be that crop failure is widespread enough to result in food shortages at the national level. The deficit might be met by imports if the government can afford them. If not, then a national food deficit ensues which may make a valid claim on international food resources. In this case it
would be appropriate to sell food aid through the national marketing system. It would also be appropriate to use the revenue from these sales to finance relief.

Second, local market supply can be impaired by a variety of causes which Amartya Sen labels “push failure” — logistic difficulties, poor flows of market information and patterns of trader activity — which leave the demand for food in local markets unsatisfied. The fragmented nature of many African markets leave them vulnerable to such local shortages. This may constitute a second claim on international emergency food resources if a government does not have the means to provide local market supply support. In cases such as this, there seems to be no good reason why food aid (or better the equivalent value of local food) should not be sold to local traders or to women who are used to selling their own produce in the market and who, in turn, will sell it to people who can afford to buy it. These sales could generate funds to help support local cash-for-work projects and provide an income for small traders and local women.

A third cause of supply failure relative to food demand may be the consequence of successful famine relief? If the transfer of resources of families facing starvation is not in the form of food aid but as cash or other tradeable commodities, then the demand for food will rise and may exceed available local supply. If this is so, food prices will tend to rise and erode the value of the new income transferred to the poorer families. Support for local market supply in these circumstances would certainly constitute a valid claim on international food resources if the government were unable to provide the additional supply of marketable food required. Indeed, this may constitute the most important use of food aid in support of “relief-development strategies.”

This line of reasoning suggests that it is important to decide the extent to which supply failure or demand failure predominates. Most often, at least in Africa, both occur as so many rural people are farmers who produce for themselves and for the market so that crop failure affects both household income and market supply. It is also important to attempt to establish whether or not the restoration of food demand can be met by local supply. It is also important to establish, in the case of supply failure, whether this affects the national market or local markets. In the case of supply failure, emergency food aid may be a very valuable way of providing temporary support to ensure that the demand for food is satisfied.

**Food aid - commodity exchanges: Support for local terms of trade**

Food aid has a more specific use in market exchanges when it is used to defend local terms of trade. The effect of drought on the rates at which products are exchanged in the countryside are profoundly important for both producer and consumer. It is most important that the income of producers is protected, in order to maintain stable food consumption, and also to protect the stock of household assets.

For example, a drought which reduces the carrying capacity of the range results in unusually large numbers of animals being sold, a sharp decline in animal prices and, frequently, a sharp increase in grain prices due to scarcities in nearby producing areas. This means that pastoralists’ terms of trade are affected adversely by not one, but two influences.

The provision of relief grain in exchange for animals at “fair rates of exchange” (which has been done in Mali and in Kenya) achieves at least three objectives at the same time. First, it preserves the value of animals and thus the value of the pastoralists’ income. Second, it accelerates the offtake of animals and thus helps to preserve long run range carrying capacity. Third, if the animals can be slaughtered and the meat preserved, it transforms deteriorating food stocks into food stocks with an extended “shelf life.” In the case of the Kenya scheme, the meat was sun-dried and used in school feeding programmes, but equally the meat could have been retained as community food security stocks. Thus, the decline in pastoral income was reduced and the reduction in the value of the stocks being drawn down was minimized.

Other schemes with similar aims have been attempted. Grain was exchanged for fish in Ethiopia when the demand for lake fish fell precipitously, endangering fishermen's income. It is conceivable that the same principle could be applied in similar circumstances to other products when demand falls to the extent that the incomes of producer families are placed in jeopardy.

**Some examples of activities of the “relief-development” kind**

During the recent African “food emergency” many people in national governments and international agencies were thinking along the lines set out in this paper. It is not possible to provide a complete inventory of recent experience. However, Table 2 offers a list of annotated examples to draw attention to interesting work which has been done and which deserves further assessment and analysis. It is vitally important that this experience is not lost. There can be nothing surer than the occurrence of continued periods of drought in Africa. Despite the lessons of the 1970s there was very little experience brought forward for application to the famines of the 1980s. This should not be allowed to happen again.

A full inventory of “emergency” activities with development objectives would make a fascinating contribution to collective knowledge and experience.

Although the list of activities in Table 2 is incomplete, it demonstrates some interesting points. For example, it is...
Table 2. Some examples of “relief-development strategy” type activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support for declining rural terms of trade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animal-grain exchange: Kenya, Mali</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fish-grain exchange: Ethiopia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commodity-grain exchange: Mozambique</td>
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<tr>
<th>Restoration of household assets and agricultural inputs</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seed distribution programmes: Ethiopia, Kenya etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution of agricultural implements: Ethiopia, Mozambique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(These constitute income transfers as grants. Examples of income transfer by cash grants are not known)</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income transfers</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feeding programmes of many varieties in many countries</td>
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<tr>
<td>(The effect of feeding programmes on household investment is not known, is worth investigating but is likely to be slight. The effect on human capital likely to be considerable. The comparative costs and benefits of these schemes which are based on a variety of principles, deserve a more thorough analysis in the African context)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Projects designed to create permanent new employment opportunities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None known, except that some community work projects in Botswana may result in participants starting their own small enterprises</td>
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<tr>
<th>Cash for work projects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Cash for food” projects in Ethiopia (The projects undertaken include feeder roads, improved water supply, land terracing, small-scale irrigation, construction of buildings, brick production, school construction, reforestation, fish pond construction, flood protection)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The effect on household investment is likely to be considerable: The effect on community level investment is also likely to be considerable and the effects of these projects, particularly over the next few years, would be worth monitoring)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Labour-based drought relief programme” in Botswana (Projects undertaken include land clearing, development of new water sources, road building, airstrip construction, protection of cropland from animals, small building projects, brickmaking, grain milling. The effect on household investment is not known but is likely to be slight; the effect on community and national level investment is likely to be considerable)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Cash for work” element in Mozambique resettlement support project (details not known)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Food for work projects</th>
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<tr>
<td>Expanded land improvement projects in Ethiopia</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Programmes to expand skills</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incorporated into some “cash for food” activities in Ethiopia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

almost certain that not more than 10% of the total emergency resources which have flowed into Africa in the last four years have been applied to activities designed to enhance household investment, to support declining rural-rural terms of trade, to enhance the value of household food security stocks, to increase the value of human skills, to increase the value of household assets or even to increase the value of national investment. This being the case, the list of activities offered here, incomplete as it may be, points to ways in which emergency assistance has been used and could be more effective if applied on a larger scale.

It is possible to meet urgent human need and the underlying causes of famine at the same time if transfers of income to households facing income collapse and starvation are made in ways which protect household assets, mobilize labour, enhance skills, create new employment possibilities and result in increased investment at the household and community level.

We turn now to examine a set of strategic issues which will help to determine the allocation of resources in particular circumstances.

STRATEGIC ISSUES

It is not possible, of course, to prescribe action for every circumstance. The purpose of this section is to identify the conditions which would be likely to influence the allocation of emergency resources between various activities which might compete for support. Although this paper is mainly written in the context of international agency emergency assistance, there is no difference in principle between the allocation of national and international resources. The purpose of international assistance, when all is said and done, is to augment the resources available to a national government to provide relief for its citizens.

There are four parameters which generally determine the broad shape of the appropriate “relief-development strategy.”
Supply or demand failure, or both

Supply failure in a pure form is exceedingly rare as a cause of famine and is only likely to occur if there is complete interruption to international trade. Demand failure generally predominates. The remedy is income transfers and, if national food production is sufficient to meet the enhanced demand for food, food aid is not indicated. Supply failure resulting in either an increase in the “structural food deficit” or in local shortages or in local shortages once demand failure has been corrected, calls for the supply of food aid, but its uses will be different in each case. These have already been discussed.

Rates of “permanent” rural unemployment

The conventional view of famine is that its effects are temporary. This paper has suggested that this may not be the case and often is not. Drought generally reveals an increasing level of permanent under- and unemployment in the African countryside.

If the prospects of an early return to a previous occupation, generally farming, is good, then a “relief-development strategy” should concentrate on investment in land improvement, economic and social community infrastructure, the protection of household assets and the provision of agricultural inputs. If, on the other hand, a return to a previous occupation simply results in a return to a way of life which is so hazardous that the risk of future famine is inevitable, then a “relief-development strategy” must place considerable effort and resources at the disposal of activities designed to expand skills and create new employment opportunities.

The condition of the people

The third parameter which influences the allocation of resources is the extent to which hunger has already resulted in economic and social dislocation and a deterioration in health and nutrition.

Two critical events in the evolution of famine define three sets of circumstances which demand different allocative strategies. Although these may all occur at the same time, it is helpful to treat them as a sequence for the purposes of clarity. The two events are:

- a decline in nutritional and health status; and
- the movement of whole families away from home in search of food.

Before a serious decline in health status and before large scale population movements the immediate priorities are the provision of a floor to the liquidation of household assets, support to collapsing household income by the defence of rural terms of trade (possibly by additional food sales in local markets or special arrangements to exchange animals for grain at “fair” rates), income transfers to prevent large-scale family movements in the form of grants to labour scarce households and work opportunities for others. These latter would be designed to transfer income and also increase the stock of productive household and community assets. Food supplements for vulnerable groups of people, pregnant and lactating women, children and the elderly and treatment of seriously malnourished may also be required.

In addition, the strategy will almost always include the provision of additional health and social services because famine prone groups are typically remote from the service infrastructure and low-cost health interventions increase the efficiency of other emergency inputs and save lives.

When nutritional and health status have declined or unusual labour migration has occurred but before whole families have moved in search of food the same possibilities exist to arrest the decline in household incomes, but the assumption has to be that more resources will be devoted to making income transfers to households as grants to “hold the situation” while work schemes are being devised and set up.

Although raising the level of food demand above that of food needs remains the primary target, urgency demands that nutritional deficiencies are corrected in the most rapid manner possible. The great need is for energy rich foods and for the organization of feeding programmes. The nutritional, as opposed to the economic, value of food aid is of considerable interest and importance in this situation. The point is that if household consumption behaviour coincided with nutritional optimality the best donor strategy would be to give aid of the maximum economic value and to make sure that nutritious foods were available in the market for people to buy. However, it may be necessary to provide high energy foods, for example, and target their use for the undernourished and vulnerable. Oil and pulses are typically scarce in rural markets in Africa during a famine. There are both nutritionally excellent and of high market value, thus fulfilling both economic and nutritional criteria for efficient donor to household transfers. They are also notably scarce in the commodity bundles normally supplied by international food aid donors.

This period in the evolution of famine stands between feasible preventative actions and the wholesale collapse of the household economy. Despite the other urgent demands being made on resources, a considerable proportion must be reserved for activities directed towards long-term priorities, or else more and more families will become dependent on income grants and possibilities for making a permanent impact on underlying problems will be lost.

When whole families have already moved in search of food, the priorities change quite dramatically. This represents a failure of prevention and may constitute strong evidence that the long-term economic viability of many families is in question.

The first priority must be the supply of basic needs — food, shelter and health supplies. Here food aid may be justifiably regarded as a “medicine” but only in as much as its objective is the nutritional rehabilitation of people who are undernourished.
As soon as “recovery” permits, a major set of choices confront the people. Either they return home to take up their former occupation or to participate in “relief-development strategies” outlined above. If that is possible they should do so quickly. Alternatively they must seek alternative employment opportunities. In either case food aid should cease to be regarded as “a medicine” and should become an investment resource.

“Relief centres” represent a failure of prevention. They also represent a signal that households may not survive in their former occupations. They therefore represent an important, but entirely uncaptured, opportunity to expand the range of household skills, thus increasing the value of human capital and diversifying potential household economic activities and employment prospects. It is unheard of that “relief centres” should be turned into schools but the alternative for those who are unable to return to their former employment may be destitution. Food aid represents a major resource for providing income to families while they examine their future and adjust to it.

Capacity issues

The fourth parameter which determines a feasible strategy and therefore influences the allocation of emergency resources, is the complex of factors which come under the rubric of “capacity.” This includes transport, organization, management, technical skills and the like.

Many would argue that famine relief, even in its simplest form, overwhelms local capacity and more cannot be expected. It is true that famine relief imposes enormous additional burdens on a national civil service and the technical agencies of government. Imports by volume may double; transport patterns are turned upside down, inefficiencies abound; new agencies are formed and reformed; more people are hired and still everything goes wrong.

However, there are three additional points to bear in mind. The first is that unless emergency resources are used more efficiently, Africa will become more and more vulnerable to famine on an increasing scale. The second is that “famine relief” has caused considerable fragmentation of government capacity. This is not unconnected with the international view current a few years ago, that a “super-ministerial agency” should be established to deal with famine. This might be a rational strategy when skills and resources are relatively abundant as it provides a centre of power which can allocate resources without competition. It is less rational when skills are scarce and when famine relief is viewed as an attack on long-term problems. In this case, the allocation of institutional responsibility becomes very divisive. The third point to be made here is that a “capacity” which exists has been almost entirely ignored. It is the capacity of people and small communities to organize themselves in their own interest. The fact is that country people are amazingly experienced in organizing small-scale activities and managing their own affairs. They do it all the time.

The plain truth is that the magnitude of the problem is so enormous that there is no government or international agency which could possibly implement, in conventional terms, the variety and number of small scale activities which are required to impose a lasting change on the face of rural Africa.

This does not mean that all control is abandoned. An accounting is required. Technical advice will be sought if there is justifiable faith in the quality of the advice offered. Progress can be monitored and problems discussed. Joint evaluations — “joint” meaning the community, the government and the donor — are valuable for all concerned, not least the donor. They provide a potential instrument for transferring experience from one community to another and for allowing communities to compare their experience and progress.

“Relief-development strategy” and “disaster preparedness”

An integrated “relief-development strategy” places “disaster preparedness” in a new light. While it is true that information systems that provide advance warning of crop failure and income collapse need to be developed (with particular attention to the “demand side”), information was not a limiting constraint to relief action in Africa during the 1980s. However, it was a constraint to the implementation of activities which would have a development impact. It is not difficult to identify groups of people who face greater than usual threats to survival from famine.

The successful implementation of activities designed to expand employment potential in an emergency setting requires at least three major prior unconventional undertakings. First, contingency plans which identify potentially viable alternative employment opportunities for people in drought-prone areas should be costed and in place before famine causes major social and economic dislocation. These ideas cannot easily be grasped out of the air “on the day” although many people living in threat of famine abound with ideas themselves. Second, therefore, extensive consultation is required with households likely to be affected by drought in order to establish their views of their future. Third, there needs to be a total integration of rural development strategies with “disaster preparedness” as well as “drought recovery” strategies. Famines result from low rural incomes and income instability. The objectives of rural development and “relief-development strategies,” therefore, coincide. Attention to these three activities would transform the usefulness of “disaster preparedness” and liberate additional resources for the prevention of future famine.

THE ASSESSMENT OF EMERGENCY PROGRAMMES

One way of drawing together and summarizing the issues covered in this paper is to consider the criteria by which the “success” of famine relief might be judged. This is of considerable practical importance given that the World Food Programme (WFP), UNICEF, the OEOA and a
Table 3. Criteria for assessing famine relief

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short-term objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contributions to nutritional welfare</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribution to health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention of internal migration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defence of rural-rural and rural-urban terms of trade</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support to household food security strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribution to household consumption</td>
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<td>Contribution to employment</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Long-term objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to new employment opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to household investment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to community investment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contribution to national investment</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The number of bilateral aid donors are making assessments of the value of their contributions to Africa’s recent drought relief. The criteria proposed here take into account the need to provide relief for human suffering and the need to contribute to household and community investment. The criteria are first listed for easy reference in Table 3 and discussed briefly.

The methodology is not discussed in detail although it should be noted that the approach developed by the WFP Evaluation Service is perfectly appropriate to the assessment of the effectiveness of the strategy proposed here. There are many difficulties involved, not least that there is no possibility for maintaining a “control” group and no way of knowing for sure that emergency resources, rather than “natural recovery” are responsible for any improvement observed.

Nutrition and health objectives

The objective is clearly to maintain the people affected by famine in good health and nutrition or to restore them to this condition as quickly as possible. There are a number of data sets available which document the nutritional recovery of people receiving relief assistance in a variety of forms. It would be of great value if these records could be compared as this analysis might suggest how the costs of these programmes (administrative as well as material) compared with the rapidity of nutritional recovery. The relative efficiency of food and cash transfers needs to be clarified.

Much less is known about the degree to which alternative delivery systems designed to prevent and cure common ailments are effective. The synergism between disease and malnutrition is well known but only recently has the prevention of diseases such as diarrhoea, measles and respiratory tract infections achieved the prominence it deserves. This is due in no small measure to efforts by UNICEF and USAID.

The prevention of income erosion

The movement of rural terms of trade are measured rather simply by observing changes in the prices at which transactions occur in the countryside. Some data exist but their collection should be routine. Changes in the rates at which pastoralists exchange animals for grain are particularly important. It follows that the extent to which adverse price changes can be prevented is an important measure of the effectiveness of famine relief.

The prevention of “whole family” migration

The search for work by adult family members may indicate stress on the family budget but may also indicate the effectiveness of household strategies to supplement income. The freedom with which this migration can occur and the availability of alternative employment are therefore important indicators of success.

However, the migration of whole families in search of food is quite a different matter. Famine relief must seek to prevent this. A measure of its effectiveness is the extent to which it has succeeded.

Consumption objectives

A major objective is the maintenance of stable food consumption patterns. Income transfers, as we have seen, may be achieved as food grants, commodity wages or cash wages. The contribution various elements of a relief programme make to the consumption of the families most in need, taking into account the different requirements and constraints facing families with high and low dependency ratios, is therefore an important indicator of the contribution famine relief has made to household income.

Typically, the flows of new income are complex and varied. School feeding programmes, food ration distribution, clinic ration distribution and wages from public works schemes may all make varied contributions to the income of different family groups. It is worth working out which families are deriving the maximum benefit and from which sources.

Employment objectives

These fall into three main categories: temporary employment opportunities for those who will return to a previous occupation, new seasonal employment opportunities and permanent full-time employment opportunities. Until fairly recently there was little emphasis placed on this important, indeed central aspect of famine relief and, even now, the resources allocated to these objectives are pitifully small. Nevertheless there is some experience, notably in Ethiopia, Botswana and Mozambique, which deserves closer examination.

For example, it would be well worth investigating the extent to which participants in public works schemes gained...
new skills later used to generate income. It would also be worth assessing more carefully the extent to which the recent drought resulted in permanent unemployment amongst those who were affected.

Investment objectives

This paper has repeatedly emphasized the need for local investment to result from famine relief. In particular it has emphasized the need for investment in assets which will lead to higher and more stable incomes for those most vulnerable to drought.

The line of reasoning pursued here suggests that an assessment of the extent to which famine relief has contributed to investment must be one of the most important parts of an evaluation and of a famine relief programme.

Investment at the household level is given pride of place as this is likely to contribute most to future household income. This may arise from savings from new income. Remarkable as it may be, the evidence from Ethiopia quoted here suggests that families in the most straightened circumstances have a high propensity to invest in their future. It may also arise from work done to improve the value of household assets — either physical assets or human skills — as a result of a famine relief programme. Third, investment may be achieved as a result of community work projects that improve land or create new water sources or develop irrigation systems or the like, to which families most at risk have access.

Investment of this kind might usefully be assessed according to whether it is likely to contribute to higher future incomes, more stable future incomes, a higher value of household food security stocks (physical or capital), or all three.

At the second level, the community level, investment may be made as a result of work done to improve the economic infrastructure or social assets. The line of reasoning followed here suggests that any assessment of this investment should include a very careful examination of the extent to which the benefits are likely to flow to families most at risk to income instability and collapse.

At the third level, the national level, stocks of national assets may be improved as a result of famine-related work projects. In this case, it is even more important to examine carefully the likely flows of future benefits before concluding that, whatever contribution to current consumption work projects of this kind have made, there has also been a contribution to future household food security.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued for a radically different approach to famine relief by drawing attention to the fact that famine is essentially a problem of incomes and employment, and that famine relief should be concerned with short and long-run solutions to low and unstable incomes and declining job prospects.

The strategy proposed here has a number of institutional implications both for governments and international donors.

First, no single relief input can stand alone. Food aid, by itself, is incomplete. This suggests the need for much greater co-ordination among donor inputs, a matter which has been given considerable attention within the UN family over the last few years. However, the most “successful” famine relief programmes are co-ordinated by effective government control. Donors should support this development and not feel that their place in the sun has been usurped.

Second, the arbitrary divisions between relief and development assistance are unhelpful in practice, although they will doubtless remain as ways of soliciting additional resources. However, when it comes to the use of the resources, great damage is done if donor rules do not admit considerable flexibility. This line of reasoning makes a case for considerable liberalization of the rules under which food and other emergency aid is administered.

Third, the nature of the programming skills required for the administration of international assistance in support of a “relief-development strategy” differ from convention. This is not to suggest that everyone involved needs to be a development economist, but they do need to understand the underlying processes which make people vulnerable to famine.

Fourth, “disaster preparedness,” if the logic of this paper is sound, has less to do with creating new institutional capacity which will stand virtually idle for seven years out of ten, and more to do with identifying particular groups of people who have been declared by history to be vulnerable to repeated famines and with concentrating effort on investment strategies which will increase and stabilize their incomes. This — not the capacity of a central government agency to predict their next misfortune will make them “drought-proof.”

Finally, the eradication of famine on other continents has been one of the remarkable achievements of the last two decades. Both China and India stand as notable examples of the effort. Poverty still exists but the cataclysmic periods of hunger which left thousands dead every few years appears to be a part of history. Africa has much to learn from this experience and there is very little sense that this is recognized in either national or international fora.

The task demands an alliance; an alliance of will and resources between the people (first and foremost the people), their governments, international donor agencies and now a new partner, the people of industrialized countries who want to contribute to the solution of Africa’s hunger. There is no longer room for insularity, irrational administrative divisions at either national or international levels, or sectoral bias which bases response on a narrow platform. The problem will be solved by a combination of
good policy at international and national levels, a better understanding of the nature of the problem, sustained flows of resources (as opposed to flamboyant temporary exhibitions of generosity) and most of all, a sense of hope among the people most at risk which will free their initiative, imagination and effort to work their way out of trouble knowing they have the support they need.

REFERENCES


