Food aid and development in southern Sudan: implications of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement for response planning

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In the post-Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) era a greater impact on the unacceptably high prevalence of child malnutrition is more likely to come from additional investment and attention to education, health, hygiene, sanitation and childcare practices than from expanded food aid interventions. The negligible impact of food aid on malnutrition, although most commonly challenged on the quality of needs assessments, is equally attributable to the timing of deliveries, and a dysfunctional distribution system. Comparatively few resources have been allocated to strengthen skills for assessing, analysing and understanding community priorities, local economies, and social safety nets. A more thoughtful allocation of scarce funds could have more impact if a range of alternative responses was considered. Participation in and commitment to a more independent livelihoods analytical forum would improve communication with the new government, local leaders and other partners, as well as providing a platform for reaching consensus on both humanitarian and development planning over the next five years.

Keywords: child malnutrition, food aid, humanitarian response, livelihoods analysis, post-conflict needs assessment and management

Introduction

The working environment in southern Sudan has changed perceptibly since the January 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA). A reduction in the destabilising effects of conflict means that livelihood practices are not being interrupted to the same degree. This allows more timely implementation of activities critical to the agricultural and livestock calendars. Markets and trade activities have revived surprisingly quickly, providing greater access to food for most rural communities. These improvements provide further evidence of the resilience and flexibility of livelihoods in southern Sudan, and of their ability to cope with the variations in the weather that are typical of such agro-ecological zones.

This paper examines the history of response planning in the region over the past two decades and proposes a fresh approach that adapts to the new operational context. Although the focus is on the work of the World Food Programme (WFP), the challenge posed by the need to adapt both the type and the style of response is relevant to all organisations planning post-CPA recovery strategies. The Southern Sudan Commission for Census, Statistics and Evaluation (SSCCSE) receives special attention because it is now the custodian of all the assessment work and information undertaken by the new government and its international partners. In the past food aid has used the largest...
share of donor resources. However, similar levels of investment will be required to address the underlying causes of unacceptably high malnutrition rates—causes that have not received adequate attention in the past.

Although the present monitoring capacity is not as strong as it once was, a lack of information about access to food is not the root of the problem. Southern Sudan is known to have some of the most robust information on livelihoods, gained from thousands of field assessments conducted in the past 10 years and refined through a process of continual analysis. Instead, the problem is linked to an inability to process this information and a lack of institutions and structures to analyse the information and make use of such analyses to provide a better informed response.

Better use will have to be made of the available information in order to support stronger post-CPA planning and responses. All stakeholders should ensure that they support the new Government of Southern Sudan (GOSS) in its role of coordination and collaboration. Some accountability and cost-benefit analysis should form part of this role if longer-term benefits are to be expected.

The expensive food aid delivery operation undertaken in the past is unlikely to have had any sustainable impact on the high levels of child malnutrition, which have remained unchanged for decades.

**Background and history**

In the war years continuing conflict led to many parts of southern Sudan being ranked as highly food insecure. Emergency interventions, primarily in the form of food aid and the establishment of Supplementary and Therapeutic Feeding Centres (SFC/TFC), were a common response by agencies and NGOs in these years. The reasoning behind this response was logical because field access was limited by widespread insecurity and there was an urgent need to respond to humanitarian needs in what was often the only means possible. However, most of the feeding centres found that improvements in the nutritional status of children quickly deteriorated again after they had been discharged and returned home.

Food distribution efforts faced a recurring series of constraints, which included: (a) political constraints such as insecurity and flight bans; (b) logistical constraints, which prevented or delayed deliveries; (c) a distribution approach that conflicted with local expectations and norms; and (d) low levels of understanding about livelihoods and patterns of household access to food, such as seasonal factors, the broad range of coping options, kin support obligations and traditional social support and value systems.

Continuing warfare and restricted access meant that malnutrition rates persisted at unacceptably high levels. It was not possible to engage more closely with communities during the conflict, however, and this style of response continued. Criticism of the targeting of food aid resulted in significant improvements in the assessment and quantification of food needs between 1994 and 2003 but the logistical and distribution constraints persisted. On reflection, the Bahr el Ghazal (BEG) crisis in 1998 had a significant impact on these achievements. This crisis has been written up and analysed in a number of
documents and there are various opinions about what went wrong. The WFP assessment team shouldered much of the blame for delayed warnings and its slow response. Few people knew that the serious predicament of Bahr el Ghazal and the Western Flood Plain zone had been clearly reported as early as November 1997 (Fielding, 1997; Kamunge and Khachaturia, 1998). Decision-making was conducted behind closed doors by donors and WFP senior managers. In the lead up to that time there was strong donor pressure to reduce the level of food aid, and newly appointed decision-makers in the programme director’s office at WFP (then based at the UN complex in Gigiri, Nairobi) were not familiar with the situation on the ground or the analytical methodology. In addition to the failure of decision-makers in WFP and among donors (country representatives) to test the rigour of the Household Economy Analysis Unit’s (HEAU) work, there was confusion about the conflicting forecasts made by key NGOs, WFP advisers in the northern sector, and the Southern Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SSRRA) database and monitoring unit. The need for a standard framework for analysis was overlooked and there was a lack of confidence in the variety of information available. As a result the findings by the technical unit were ignored at the critical planning stage and the response was eventually triggered by media attention. On reflection, it can be seen that the lack of an independent analytical forum for testing competing forecasts and developing a standard framework for analysis was a major flaw in the system.

One result of these events was that, after 1998, it became easier to request more food aid from donors who feared the risk of another ‘famine’ following Annual Needs Assessments (ANAs) on Crop Food Supply Assessment Missions (CFSAMs) that reported poor crop performance. The fact that the crisis had its roots in political and military events was largely overlooked. In reality, it was the insecurity and conflict that had depleted assets and restricted normal coping and recovery. Although in specific areas food aid later contributed to a degree of asset recovery in communities devastated by attacks, such aid could not be justified everywhere and rarely reached the targeted beneficiaries as intended. Gradually, annual assessments reverted to analyses of harvests rather than of livelihoods, and crop performance checked against malnutrition levels re-emerged as the key indicator for general vulnerability. WFP led the Annual Needs Assessments (ANA) so the predominant response to the trend of unacceptably high levels of malnutrition—and the exaggerated annual household food deficits (i.e. actual seasonal shortfalls)—was food aid.

Increased food aid was seen as a catch-all solution but it also prevented a more detailed analysis of the chronic underlying causes of malnutrition. In recent years perceptions of vulnerability to food shortfalls have become distorted by confused assessments and limited analyses that lack the use of any clear baseline reference. Most reports on malnutrition request food aid wherever surveys are conducted. Political factors have also contributed to the confusion over the years. It was common for the WFP Annual Needs Assessment to be strongly influenced by the amount of food requested by the operations in the northern sector.

To add to these problems, the Technical Support Unit (TSU) assessment team had disbanded by 2003 and the Food Security Analysis Group (FSAG) gradually lost support
as partners saw food aid decision-making becoming increasingly isolated inside Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) and controlled by WFP senior managers in Khartoum. These developments meant that appeals for increasing levels of food aid were not rigorously questioned and there was less need to provide high-quality assessments. Ironically, the WFP/TSU assessment team was, before this time, arguably one of the strongest in Africa. The unit had over 3000 assessment reports and detailed briefing kits. Southern Sudan was classified under seven food economy zones and vulnerability to food insecurity was monitored throughout the year. Analysis provided information on how different wealth groups in these zones accessed their minimum kilocalorie requirements through the different seasons, examining all the sources of food and income as well as expenditure patterns. The impact of change could be analysed against a clear baseline reference. This information has recently been consolidated by the SSCCSE (Muchomba and Sharp, 2006).

The need to adapt to the post CPA situation

Appeals for food aid for southern Sudan do not appear to have followed a clear logic in recent years. Before 1998 (the BEG crisis year) the food aid appeals ranged between 25,000 and 60,000 tonnes. In 1998 (the last crisis year) distribution levels were reported at close to 90,000 tonnes. The 2004–2005 appeal—after several years of recovery and immediately preceded by two ‘better than normal’ production years, one of which was regarded as ‘exceptional’ (FAO/WFP, 2002–2005)—requested a record 178,000 tonnes, which was almost double that of the 1998 crisis year. (To give these quantities some meaning, if the population of southern Sudan were 10 million, and the average household size were six, this would provide every household, covering all wealth groups across southern Sudan, with two 50 Kg bags of WFP relief food per household for the year with some remaining for contingencies.)

In reality it was not possible to deliver these quantities before the peace agreement. Figure 1 shows planned deliveries against actual deliveries. Past logistical constraints have meant that lower performance months tended to coincide with the periods when deliveries were most needed, that is, in the pre-harvest ‘belt-tightening’ period. Improved levels of deliveries came after the harvest period had begun.

As well as appeals for increased food relief in ‘better than normal’ years, there is also a consistent track record of under-delivery against planned targets for distributions, once again this has led to a questioning of the robustness or usefulness of the ANA, which is normally conducted in the latter part of the year. A household’s access to food and vulnerability to food insecurity will largely be determined by any constraints on coping in the first half of the year. Households assess strategies for this period following the threshing of their harvests, which usually takes place in December and January.

In recent years the lack of an analytical framework has often led to ANA assessments that report annual deficits of at least 15–20 per cent. However, annual deficits of such levels are in fact rare. Deficits of this size can occur for periods of three months or more—usually between April and July. Despite improved security and access to food,
Recent ANAs have expressed annual shortfalls of far above these levels, when the real annual figure might be 5–10 per cent and the seasonal deficit might possibly reach 20–25 per cent in difficult years. If the WFP predictions for annual deficits were correct, the expected cost of coping would have resulted in considerable asset loss, stress migration or other unnecessary suffering for households, leading to events similar to those witnessed in 1998. However, the years continue to pass without any accountability checks on the earlier predictions and/or the expected consequences of under-delivery or poor timing of deliveries. It can only be assumed that people maintain lifestyles consistent with surviving in a tough environment that lacks basic services. Although unacceptably high levels of malnutrition persist, the overall picture demonstrates the high resilience of the local food economy in terms of people’s ability to access their minimum food needs. Where this is not the case, asset depletion, stress coping and increased kin support would need to cover the seasonal shortfalls combined with persevering through the traditional ‘hunger period’. However, the indication in most cases is that asset recovery is occurring. Across southern Sudan the people have an extraordinary ability to maximise their available resources and have perfected a livelihood that matches the agro-ecology and makes use of its natural resources. Despite this, no one appears to question the generally negligible impact of food relief. Institutional forces that appear to allow these low-impact interventions to continue have been identified, among others, as: (a) food relief as a resource driven response; that is, the resources for alternative responses are not being offered; (b) political influences; (c) the lack of salaries for the administration and army; (d) media images and messages portraying the whole of Sudan as a place where children are starving because of crop failure; (e) poor decision-maker and donor awareness of the real issues; (f) a lack of capacity to process information, resulting in poor decision-making.

**Figure 1** Actual food aid deliveries as a percentage of planned distributions in NBEG 2005

![Bar chart showing actual food aid deliveries as a percentage of planned distributions in NBEG 2005.](image)

Source: Adapted from WFP reports
in limited analysis; (g) the absence of any recognised technical body to facilitate consensus-building and collaboration for decision-making; and (h) a high turnover of staff at all levels, resulting in poor institutional memory.

The unpredictability of food aid and the small quantities actually received by intended beneficiaries tends to counter any risk of dependency in most cases. The real benefit of food aid during the war years was to ease the burden of taxation on communities. For the poor, who were often expected to contribute a greater percentage of their harvest, it played an important role in reducing the impact of taxation as it was deducted at source (primary and/or secondary redistributions) making it easier for the administration. In the post CPA period this could be expected to gradually reduce as the administration and army are paid and food security improves with peace.

The limited impact of relief food interventions on child malnutrition

Increases in food rations are the dominant recommendation of field assessments and nutritional reports, which contain numerous references to ‘the hunger gap’ and ‘disappointing harvests’. However, information on childcare practices, breastfeeding, weaning, complementary foods and water consumption by lactating mothers—especially in the dry season—remains conspicuously absent. Appeals for emergency response ‘delivery-style’ interventions continue despite improved access to communities. Following the CPA, changes in the style and type of response are now clearly required.

Figure 2 illustrates the contribution made by food aid. It is widely reported that little food relief reaches the targeted groups. The low impact of food aid is largely attributed to the fact that small quantities are delivered over long periods of time following redistribution within the community. Vulnerable people manage through normal coping options.

**Figure 2** Food aid compared to other food sources for poor groups in NBEG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Own production</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purchased grain</td>
<td>15-20%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Food aid</td>
<td>1-3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other food sources</td>
<td>55-65%</td>
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</table>

*Source: SSCCSE/LAF meeting minutes and member reports, March 2006*
and, at other times and at some unacceptable cost, through stress-coping mechanisms. Food aid cannot be seen to have made a significant difference (WFP, 2004). The expansion of other food and income sources—that is, normal coping—has maintained necessary access to food. The appropriateness of the response must be challenged on the basis of needs assessment, and with regard to the quantities delivered, the timing of deliveries and the effectiveness of the distribution system.

Since the CPA, current practice has changed only in terms of the mode of delivery—increased road access has reduced some costs and the once heavy reliance on aircraft. This reflects the strong logistical bias of the organisation. Even with the pre-positioning of relief food in 2006, distributions began slowly and continued to be staggered and aimed at specific groups that it was hard to prove were the most vulnerable.

The general reasoning behind interventions can be regarded as sound for contingency responses, that is, responding to unpredictable displacement following localised insecurity or to returning groups trying to re-establish themselves before the crop production season. However, when it comes to addressing possible hunger in the months between May and September, the distributions are often too little and/or too late to support agricultural activity and reintegration. WFP’s primary objective is to address malnutrition but such responses are unlikely to address the main contributing causes of malnutrition. A food aid response remains appropriate in some areas and not in others, but the impact will continue to be insignificant if the amounts, timing and distribution of deliveries cannot be adapted to the circumstances prevalent in specific livelihoods.

The impact on child malnutrition
Using northern Bahr el Ghazal as an example, a rise in the Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) rate to over 20 per cent is typical in May (it can be as high as 27–30%). This trend has been consistent since surveys began. This peak then subsides to closer to 15 per cent towards the end of the year but with another smaller peak between August and September. These are typical but still unacceptably high GAM rates. Surveys are now being conducted more regularly and consistently, including during the wet season, and the indications are that these trends persist. Nutrition reports include those from Concern (Golden, 2006), Tear Fund (2003–2006), Action Contre La Faim (ACF, 2006), UNICEF (2005), and those referenced in UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (2006).

The issue is that malnutrition levels are critical year in and year out. The seasonal peak does not reflect an acute malnutrition event but a worsening of the prevalent chronic levels towards the end of the dry season. Following recent analyses, the link to food access is now less obvious (apart from access to milk by children) than the link to worsening water access and the associated deterioration in health, hygiene and sanitation practices. In addition, the workload for mothers increases and this places increased constraints on childcare.

Research with mothers with malnourished children has revealed that the dry season can affect water consumption by lactating mothers and thus their ability to breastfeed. However, these impacts appear to result from a combination of factors. More commonly reported is children’s loss of appetite, and more needs to be understood about
the causes and effects of this (SC, 2006). Women have a particularly high workload in the first six months of the year, which is the busiest period for wild food collection and small-scale trade, as well as the sale of firewood, grass and poles. Brewing and beer sales also pick up during this period, which could affect childcare and child nutrition (including the reported feeding of brewers’ grains to children). Although mothers’ workloads are always high, there is a concern that children are being left with other carers (e.g. siblings, aunts and grandmothers) at this time. Research from Ethiopia suggests that when this occurs for more than two hours per day, children are up to five times more likely to become malnourished (Duffield, 2006). One of the teams reported that mothers were not directly taking care of their children during three out of four seasons (9 out of 12 months) or, if they were, they were doing so only for a limited period (Poggo, 2005). In addition, the majority of malnourished children admitted to Supplementary Feeding Centres suffered from malaria, which was commonly compounded by respiratory infections and diarrhoea.

The introduction of complementary foods frequently induces diarrhoea. As a result, weaning may occasionally be delayed for up to two years. (This can also lead to an older child suckling, which can impede access to essential nutrients by a younger child.) The introduction of water and sugar is a common weaning practice but the water is often contaminated. When children get sick it is often reported that mothers stop giving the child breast milk. Many factors conspire to exacerbate this situation. Much of southern Sudan has few latrines, poor hygiene practices and low immunization coverage. Soap use declines in the dry season, and in the wet season it is mainly used for washing clothes. (The rainy season is the four-month period between June and September, and the dry season is the eight-month period between October and May.) Despite these obstacles, however, there are some signs for cautious optimism. The knowledge and use of oral rehydration salts and locally made substitutes are improving. Some improvement in nutritional status is noted at the start of the rains with the return of cattle from the Toic (dry season grazing area), which is associated with improved access to water, milk and childcare. However, typical GAM rates of close to 15 percent indicate that any improvements to water quality, health, hygiene and care practices are still woefully inadequate.

Recent studies indicate that mothers in the feeding centres come from all wealth groups, and may come from households with or without livestock. Men may have several wives and further assessments should be undertaken to determine whether ‘lesser wives’, or those lacking adequate male representation, are more likely to have malnourished children. The war has had an impact on the number of women returning to live with parents if they have lost husbands or if their marriages were not properly formalized. It has been observed that such women can become increasingly marginalised and can be excluded from certain types of social support when traditional safety nets tighten. None of the women interviewed had had any primary education. Interestingly, maternal health status was generally reported to be good. A common way to quickly recover lost assets and social position is to have a daughter married and receive cattle as a ‘bride price’. This practice is has a detrimental impact on the health of mothers,
household wealth and the nutritional status of children. Many of the daughters that are ‘married off’ are still children themselves when they give birth to their first child and many of these children are more likely to deliver underweight babies. More work is required to assess mothers, inside and outside feeding centres, and to determine more accurately the impact that the wealth, social status and relationship to the household may have on the nutritional status and access to resources of the mothers and their children.

**Hunger**

Sweeping assumptions have been made in the past about the ‘hunger season’, resulting in a response predominantly based on food aid to address hunger. Reports show that these food aid interventions have little impact and this section challenges several of these assumptions.

Figure 3 shows malnutrition rates peaking in April to June, reflecting the impact of conditions in the mid- to late dry season (March to April). The graph covers the period 2003–2006 and matches trends with other sources of nutritional data, including Golden (2006), Tear Fund (2003–2006), Action Contre La Faim (2006), UNICEF (2005) and those referenced in the UN Standing Committee on Nutrition (2006). Nutritional data is a trailing indicator and the graph may not illustrate clearly that the status of malnourished children results from conditions in the preceding months, that is, throughout the dry season, and peaks at the end of the season—reflecting difficult conditions in the first six months of the year.

This malnutrition trend starts to level off (depicting an improvement in nutritional status) from June and declines in July, which is the latter part of the hunger gap season. However, most reports attribute increased malnutrition predominantly to the hunger period and often fail to emphasise the other factors involved. It has been observed that

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**Figure 3** Seasonal trends for malnutrition in the western and northern counties of Aweil, 2003–2006

![Graph showing seasonal trends for malnutrition in Aweil](source)

**Source:** Adapted from SSCCSE/LAF, southern Sudan Livelihood Profiles
malnutrition levels drop back to the 15 per cent levels, which have come to be considered ‘normal’, even before food access starts to improve in August and September with the arrival of the harvest. Once again, the suggestion is that food aid might be having little impact. The trends show only slight variations even in good crop production years. In the Flood Plains livelihood zone, for example, the deterioration appears to be closely linked to the dry season. Those not moving with their cattle to the Toic areas will have less milk for their children. Mothers will spend more time away from the home, and there will be a decline in the quality and quantity of water, leading to less washing and poorer hygiene practices. Following the onset of the rains, improvements in children’s nutritional status could be more closely linked to improved access to water, milk and kin support (see figure 4).

Adults might be consuming less than 2,100 kilocalories (Kcals) per day during the hunger season but the deterioration in their nutritional status that might be expected is not being reported. Malnutrition surveys have, in most cases, only been conducted among under 5s and not adults. More needs to be understood not only about the low impact of food relief, but also about how kin sharing impacts on access to milk for children as well as adults. It is likely that, although the poor may not own livestock, milk has typically been accessible to all children through exchange and kin support. Other seasonal patterns in labour peaks and migration could be impacting on child care, water quality and quantity, the incidence of disease in humans and livestock as well as access to milk access by children.

When households split during the dry season, older children and adults at the Toic not only have better access to water, but will also consume more milk, fish and wild foods. This means they are in better condition when they return home in May–August to help with land clearing, planting, weeding and other seasonal tasks in the run-up to the next harvest. Milk also becomes more readily available to younger children at this time. When the family unites, siblings are more available to provide extra care for younger children and to relieve some of their mother’s burdens.

**Figure 4** Seasonal calendar of the Western Flood Plains zone

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**Source:** SSCCSE/LAF, southern Sudan Livelihood Profiles
In sum, no significant changes to the unacceptably high malnutrition trends have been attributed to the distribution of general food relief (WFP, 2004). Future improvements to allow adequate access to safe water, especially for lactating mothers, combined with a reduction in women’s workloads and improved education to promote better childcare, health and hygiene practices, would be expected to make a significant difference. The ‘hunger period’ (a seasonal and transient problem) could be addressed by improving husbandry practices for crops, livestock and soil, and by gradually helping to introduce more cash into the economy—particularly through increased income opportunities. However, the biggest threat to food insecurity created by two decades of war has been the loss of market and trade activity. The CPA has led to a return to more normal population mobility and the effect of restricted access during the rains because of road closures and impassable rivers now needs to be tackled. New investment in infrastructure and to improve roads and build bridges has already begun to make a significant contribution to recovery.

The reasons for the limited impact
It has been observed that food aid responses are often triggered by media attention, politics, or the resources at hand—over and above any analysis generated by information systems. The situations on the ground is often misinterpreted even when information is robust and timely. In the case of southern Sudan, it can be observed that:

• Annual figures on food deficits are assumed to be spread equally throughout the year, while the problems are nearly always related to seasonal shortfalls. This means that actual annual deficits are usually significantly smaller;
• When food aid is considered the most appropriate response, it will need to be delivered early, distributed before the seasonal stress period, and delivered in larger quantities to have any hope of assisting the intended beneficiaries;
• The present distribution system remains in place although it is widely regarded as unworkable;
• Known problems and solutions are not being shared with a wider audience;
• Unacceptable malnutrition levels remain because they require a different type and style of response in order to address them in a more sustainable way;
• Responses are commonly resource driven (Maxwell, 2006);
• Political and military developments can have significant impacts on food availability and access in southern Sudan;
• The high turnover of staff in humanitarian and development agencies, and the resulting loss of institutional memory, leads to a recycling of old problems;
• In some key agencies there is either a lack of information, a limited inclination to share information, or a tendency to analyse information and make decisions in isolation.

The distribution and targeting of aid
It is often not recognised that, by maintaining the present distribution approach of targeting food relief to small groups, WFP is attempting to impose a totally different value
system on the local administration (Harragin, 1998). A key issue to emerge from Harragin’s work and the Targeting and Vulnerabilities Report (Harragin, 1998) is that food relief provided through general distributions is regarded as a gift. It is therefore expected, after some degree of taxation, to be distributed to all. Varying percentages are redirected by the local leaders including chiefs, gol leaders and headmen who follow directives from the military or the political administration. Some then usually enters the local market, and the remainder is redistributed—but only a little reaches the intended beneficiary households.

The local system tries to address the needs of the majority, while the WFP system is trying to target a minority. The aspirations of both can only be met if the quantities delivered are adequate to cover the expected seasonal shortfall in the beneficiary community at the appropriate time. However, such a scenario would require a community education programme and sensitization of local leaders and the political administration. It would also require a decision from WFP and donors to allow the allocated amounts of food relief to be delivered to the whole community. Neither of these prerequisites was possible during the conflict and even now they are opposed by donors who insist on trying to target to most vulnerable even when it is clearly not possible to do so. The CPA provides the opportunity to pre-position strategic food reserves and to adapt and test new approaches—but only if WFP can gain donor approval to implement the recommended changes.

In reality, the responsibility also lies with the government in southern Sudan to achieve a consensus through the SSCCSE on whether food aid is the most appropriate response and, if so, to: (a) ensure that food relief food at least stays in the local economy after redistribution; (b) speed up payment to the administration and armed forces; (c) bring WFP and the local leadership together to discuss how local administrations can meet the expectations of their people while WFP reaches the most vulnerable; and (d) raise awareness in the community about distribution methods and objectives.

Other factors that contribute to a better understanding of local people’s points of view are explained in Harragin’s vulnerability study (Harragin 1998), which should be essential reading for all managers and decision makers. The study also makes the point that targeting is not necessarily the preferred solution but is used to overcome shortages of resources. In southern Sudan, for example, WFP is faced with a multitude of logistical constraints that present it with a major challenge. The southern Sudan context appears to have almost all the criteria to justify a blanket distribution of food relief to all households in the communities identified as truly food insecure (Seaman and Taylor, 2004). This is supported by research into traditional systems (e.g. Deng, 1999), which suggests that, rather than attempting to distribute small amounts over an extended period to a lower percentage of targeted beneficiaries, WFP could achieve a much bigger impact if food aid were distributed to all households at the critical time.

This argument is also relevant to the issue of returnees and the care needed in addressing their needs. The balance of such delicate livelihood systems can easily be upset. Warnings have been given about establishing reception centres for large-scale returns. There has also been concern about the way relief packages are targeted to returnees.
If a resident population is living on limited and seasonal resources, returnee packages can attract the resident poor, suppress local production and trade, and create semi-permanent camps that are difficult to close. In the past, returnee projects have created local tensions and prevented people from returning to their home areas to resume normal activities. One obvious alternative is to provide more broadly based support to resident host communities and to work closely with local leaders. Donor influence over the type and style of response needs to be recognized again here, it is easier to attract funds for returnees (emergency) than it is to support host communities (development). The political imperative to attract people back to the South adds to this with the 2011 referendum getting closer every day. Post-conflict analysis suggests that there is a risk to any peace process when there are such high expectations for peace dividends coupled with disillusionment as a result of the small number of development interventions in the years immediately following the peace agreements.

**Diversifying the response**

As well as the normal planned distributions, WFP frequently responds to unpredictable disruptions resulting from conflicts that can lead to local displacement and the loss of assets. However, food aid may not be the most appropriate response in these circumstances. Livestock numbers and associated asset recovery are increasing with peace. In the next five years it can be expected that production surpluses will be ‘banked on the hoof’ (i.e. invested in livestock). As prosperity increases, men are quick to take new wives and cattle continue to be used as dowries. Increasing livestock numbers are likely to result in increased competition for grazing—a situation that often leads to intertribal clashes and the type of displacement mentioned above.

There is a recognised risk that food aid can become a direct target. It is less well known, however, that local powerbrokers can win support by attracting food aid. Incidents of insecurity can be linked to disputes over administrative boundaries, land rights and access to disputed areas. Food aid is often part of an ‘emergency’ response that follows such incidents. Depending on the circumstances, the response may be in danger of ‘rewarding’ or playing into the hands of those who orchestrate local conflicts.

Before the days of food aid (especially in the Lakes region) cattle were frequently traded by herders for the grain surpluses produced by their neighbours. This resulted in a form of livestock off-take (i.e. a natural way of maintaining a sustainable number of livestock that can be carried by the environmental resources available locally). However, such trade can decline in times of increased deliveries of food aid. In order to avoid, or to help to resolve, conflict, livestock off-take or improved livestock trade and marketing could be considered as part of a more appropriate way to reduce incidents of insecurity. Several local traders’ associations interviewed reported that they were avoiding livestock investment because of the high risk of conflict. While these associations can invest their profits in tradable goods and other assets, other wealth groups have few alternative options. The traditional ties to livestock, and the role livestock plays in a man’s status and a household’s community linkages, remain. That said,
the traditional trade-and-exchange for grain should continue to be encouraged because it allows for critical off-take and reduces the likelihood of conflict.

Traders also describe the negative impacts of food aid on local labour markets, including losses of employment opportunities for the poor because of reduced incentives for better-off groups to extend the area of their land under cultivation.

**Plugging the ‘hunger gap’**

It is common for people to operate on less than their minimum energy requirements during the wet season—commonly referred to as the ‘hunger gap’— but there will be problems in the longer term if this is considered to be a structural deficit and not addressed in other ways. Improved infrastructure will assist with the recovery of markets and trade, and improve access to food during this period (when road closures and in-accessibility are key constraints on the availability of adequate food).

Local purchase and cash interventions are alternative responses that can promote productivity and trade. Trade is to some extent constrained by the lack of cash in the economy because barter, which was more common before the CPA, has many limiting aspects.

Greater investment in health, water, hygiene and sanitation will help to address many of the underlying causes of malnutrition linked to women’s heavy workloads and low social status. Education will be critical because the sustainable adoption of improved practice requires peer group support for behavioural change. However, all these aspects are likely to be constrained if scarce resources continue to be diverted to food interventions that have short-term and limited impacts.

**Cost-benefit analyses**

Appeals for Sudan raised billions of dollars in 2006 and it is surprising that so little of that money is allocated to assess and analyse local economies and local livelihoods. It is perhaps more surprising that calculations of opportunity cost and cost-benefit analyses are so rarely discussed. For example, when the ‘air-bridge’ was running at full capacity in 1998 it was estimated by WFP that a tonne of food delivered to northern BEG cost close to USD 1,200. Allowing for some increases since then, it can be conservatively estimated that the cost of delivering 49,000 tonnes to this relatively small part of southern Sudan in 2005 would have been close to USD 60 million and that the non-delivery of 29,000 tonnes realised savings of USD 35 million in this area alone. Since the 20,000 tonnes delivered had a negligible impact on local malnutrition levels, can the other USD 25 million be considered well spent? These resources could, theoretically, have been allocated to some of the other less developed forms of intervention, which had the potential to make more of a difference and a longer-term impact.

Beyond the 49,000 tonnes of food planned for BEG in 2005, the appeal launched after the ANA was for more than three times this amount in 2005, and for only a little less in 2006. Despite the expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars, these decisions are reached without any cost-benefit analyses of the numerous alternative responses—and without any timely account of their impact.
Many other examples can be cited to demonstrate the urgent need for greater comparative analysis. For example, the cost of delivering two WFP bags of food aid represents roughly the total annual income of a poor household in BEG (based on the sorghum grain equivalent values found in the SSCCSE/LAF Southern Sudan Livelihood Profiles). In a number of cases across southern Sudan it can be argued that the direct transfer of that amount of cash would have made a bigger difference on the ground. The incomes of most poor households across southern Sudan meet only the most basic needs (Muchomba and Sharp, 2006).

It has become vital that humanitarian and development planners recognise that different groups are vulnerable for different reasons in different livelihood zones. To illustrate this with another case, in April 2006 an Save the Children UK assessment conducted in Aroyo (Aweil Centre) noted that significant quantities of food relief had been pre-positioned in this part of northern BEG. However, Aroyo, which is located in the Ironstone Plateau livelihood zone, is much more food secure than areas in the western Flood Plains zone of BEG. The food aid in Aroyo is made even more questionable by the large number of urgent health and water needs that remain unmet in the area, and the opportunity cost of the resources needed to address these being unavailable because they have been allocated to fund a continuing food response. It is clear that—without more timely information about the most pressing needs from the grassroots, and about the most practical and impartial way to respond to these needs—aid will continue to be channelled in a haphazard and sometimes damaging fashion.

It is not expected that ‘food in kind’ responses will be replaced totally, but they do need to be costed carefully when weighing up the true cost of possible alternative responses. The expenses related to cash transfers, in terms of the logistics, transport, storage and handling (LTSH) element of relief, will have to be considered in order to make realistic and honest comparisons. The potential for local purchase and the use of cash may not always have been assessed fairly when their costs were compared with in-kind transfers in the past. Comparative assessments of the amounts spent on, and the expected impact of, improvements to infrastructure, the provision of safe water and sanitation, and improved hygiene and childcare practices must be considered by those responsible for the use of such resources.

**The importance of information and adequate analysis**

The general level of understanding of livelihoods in southern Sudan has improved markedly since the SSCCSE bean holding quarterly analytical forums. These have promoted healthy debate and discussion about humanitarian needs, recovery planning and policy development.

Observation and analysis demonstrate that, since the CPA, there has been a rapid recovery in existing markets and new markets have developed, bringing the prospect of greater food security to much of the country. Poor households are observed to be expanding income opportunities through trade, petty trade and labour. Crop production is seen as high risk and some extremely poor groups have started to prioritise
alternative production or income activities, including migrating to urban areas in search of employment. It should be noted that ‘own crop production’ makes only a small contribution to poor households, which access most of their staple grain through purchase and exchange. The development of more sustainable income opportunities for the poor would probably be most useful to these households.

Many younger Sudanese returning home are seeking first education and then employment opportunities outside the traditional rural sector. It is clear that the changing behaviour of the labour force presents new risks to traditional livelihoods—and requires careful monitoring. Such dramatic changes in rural economies have been known to result in ‘orphaned’ communities that miss out on the benefits of recovery and development (Kent, 2006). More modern livestock and husbandry practices rarely recognise the value and delicate nature of natural resources and social support systems. In hindsight, it is obvious that kin support mechanisms and access to a wide range of naturally occurring wild foods have played a major part in sustaining the Sudanese people through the long years of conflict. Environmental and social protection will be important if these invaluable resources are not to be lost. Monitoring the impact of new development initiatives will become increasingly important.

Shifting scarce resources to develop roads and infrastructure will undoubtedly help to address the problems associated with the ‘hunger season’. It is no coincidence that this season overlaps with the rains, when market activity is suppressed by road closures. Such improvements can be expected to have a significant impact on the availability of staple cereals, thereby enhancing long-term food security. While a few kilograms of relief food can be consumed in a few days, these alternative investments will clearly yield lasting benefits and returns. It seems likely that the same will be true if the underlying causes of malnutrition are recognized and addressed.

A brighter future?

The Food Security Assessment Group (FSAG) was closely associated with the old TSU and, in 2003, what remained of this group was revitalised by the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (SRRC), the Secretariat for Agriculture and Animal Resources (SAAR), the Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS-NET) and a group of NGOs to create the Livelihoods Analysis Forum (LAF). This new group developed a fresh vision to prepare for the anticipated CPA and to support the new government. The ‘livelihoods’ part of its title reflects a recognition of the need to address non-food issues after the CPA. Following the signing of the peace agreement, the LAF was officially recognised by the SSCCSE, which became the new custodian of livelihoods information and analysis in southern Sudan. Quarterly analytical forums were moved to Rumbek and, more recently, to Juba under the direction of the SSCCSE.

A report outlining some of the common denominators found in successful Food Security Information Systems (FSIS) makes a number of important recommendations (Shoham, 2006) which closely reflect the terms of reference of the LAF. The report lists seven essential components of any FSIS—one of which being a forum for
analysis, which was missing during crisis in 1997–98 (as is highlighted above). Reflecting on the changing working environment, a recent FAO paper (Pingali, Alinovi and Sutton, 2006) highlights how a ‘twin-track’ approach can help to link immediate hunger relief with longer-term strategies for sustainable growth. A practical application of this has already evolved in the ‘two-pronged’ approach developed in the SSCCSE/LAF, which aims to help community voices to be heard at the analytical table of their quarterly forum. The World Bank/UNDP Recovery and Rehabilitation Project (RRP), co-funded with the EC, shares this focus on community-driven recovery and development, and the Livelihoods Analysis Forum will play a key role in developing dialogue between national and local governments.

The inception of the SSCCSE/LAF, and the ‘common language’ it has helped to evolve, has narrowed the communication gap between agencies and organisations dealing with food security. This improved understanding is based on a groundbreaking consensus regarding the use of a standard framework that provides the contextual picture required for broader livelihoods analysis (LAF, 2004; SSCCSE/LAF, 2005). In addition to funding the World Bank/UNDP project, the EC is planning to support a comprehensive national food security information system, which it is hoped will benefit from the important foundation laid by the government and the SSCCSE. The SSCCSE has a clear vision of its future role and responsibilities. The plan has wide support from its LAF members and its implementation is only constrained by the heavy demands of the national census and by delays to the implementation of the EC information project.

Conclusions

In focus group discussions (LAF, 2006) and other semi-structured interviews using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rapid rural appraisal (RRA) techniques, communities interviewed across southern Sudan regularly rank their priorities for recovery as education, water and health. While the order of these priorities sometimes varies, the first three priorities are nearly always the same. Peace and security, in terms of good governance and law and order, are usually considered a ‘given’ for development but food relief appears much lower on the list. The 2005 WFP Annual Needs Assessment draws similar conclusions.

In investigations of the causes of malnutrition most mothers relate that food is not their chief concern. However, while several other analyses have reached the same conclusion (WFP 2004; 2006a, p. 13), and recommend taking greater heed of local customs and opinions, as well as adopting a more integrated approach to malnutrition, few changes have been observed. It is possible that the root of the problem is the fact that the majority of the resources continues to be consumed by the food delivery operations themselves (HPG, 2006).

The recent history of response planning in southern Sudan offers a number of interesting lessons. Assessments were of a high standard for a period but the appropriateness of response planning was often weak. As well as being influenced by a broad variety of unpredictable factors, the sector has been continually undermined by a high turnover
of staff, poor institutional memory, duplication of work and a cycle of indecision over assessment approaches. All these factors have been compounded by a widespread lack of awareness of livelihood analysis issues, and a resulting inability to process information effectively.

Food security information systems should by definition contain seven essential components: (a) a standard framework for analysis; (b) a well trained and motivated team; (c) trainers of trainers and in-house training capacity; (d) adequate institutional memory (human and electronic); (e) a forum for analysis and decision-making; (f) adequate field access; and (g) adequate financing (Holt, 1996; Shoham, 2005).

In southern Sudan most of the above have existed at one time or another and are now in the process of being recovered. The key component that has never before functioned as required has been the forum for decision-making. Various attempts were made to establish a Food Security Analysis Group but these all floundered. However, the SSCCSE has succeeded in establishing the Livelihoods Analysis Forum by achieving consensus with all members on a standard framework for analysing livelihoods. This provides a true contextual picture that adds value to all the other surveys and reports brought to the quarterly forum. The remaining challenge is to narrow the gap between information and response and the ‘disconnect’ between good analysis and improved decision-making.

In order to build on its achievement the SSCCSE plans to develop a comprehensive national staff capacity to lead these forums, and to encourage representatives from local government to participate in the meetings. Once the training capacity has been developed, this will become institutionalised in the government and facilitate participation by all local government authorities and relevant ministries. The SSCCSE has been mandated to undertake this role in the new constitution as a commission with both government and civil representation. As such, it functions more like a Board of Trustees, linking the various ministries, authorities and civil stakeholders, and coordinating the contributions of supporting partners. For the first time the LAF has an institutional home that offers an opportunity for all stakeholders to participate in important decisions—and to prevent scarce resources being allocated in isolation.

The recommendations made in the 2004 WFP executive report (WFP, 2004) are seen to be in line with the criteria for LAF membership set down by the SSCCSE. This gives WFP, the LAF members and other partners the added benefit of supporting the nascent government as it strives to develop its own comprehensive food security information system.

As the government moves forward at this critical early juncture, it has every chance of benefiting from the many lessons already learned by its food security partners. At the same time it will clearly have to continue to monitor closely the impacts of all its recovery and development interventions. Improvements in the nutritional status of children will hopefully remain one of the government’s top priorities. Success will require a clear commitment and a carefully integrated approach. Continuing peace will pose both new threats to as well as new opportunities for livelihoods and the role of food aid will have to adapt accordingly.
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