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**Food aid and Livelihoods:
Challenges and Opportunities in Complex Emergencies**

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Abstract

This paper describes the challenges and opportunities faced by WFP in providing food aid to protect and sustain livelihoods in complex emergencies. The first part of this paper summarizes the key characteristics of complex emergencies and highlights some of the related operational challenges. These challenges include the issues associated with securing full, unimpeded access to populations in need; the challenges of providing the right aid to the right people; preventing misappropriation; ensuring staff security; and managing relief in the absence of normal government structures, civil society institutions and occasionally of appropriate resources.

The second part of this paper describes the strategies used by people affected by crises to cope and recover, and presents some of the benefits of supporting livelihoods as a component of the emergency response. While providing food aid to those who are at risk of starvation in the short term is, and will always be, WFP's first priority, there is a growing recognition that the traditional focus of humanitarian assistance could be extended to include those at risk of losing their assets, thus saving more lives in the longer term. However, livelihoods support is not without its challenges, particularly in areas experiencing protracted conflict and forced displacement, where such relief strategies can place beneficiaries at further risk than basic assistance would, since undermining livelihoods can be a tactic of war in itself. Hence the necessity for humanitarian actors to clearly understand the political/military context in which they are operating and to engage in livelihood support activities only on the basis of careful analysis, sound programming and strong partnerships.

The paper ends by proposing some implications for programming livelihood support strategies in complex emergencies based on WFP's extensive experience in this context. Of particular importance is understanding the new dimension of risk; linking pre-emergency interventions to the emergency response; integrating livelihoods assessments into emergency needs assessments; improving the timing of interventions; as well as strong advocacy and partnerships.

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Introduction

People need food to survive. During a complex emergency, a family's normal means of accessing food may become disrupted, due to loss of crop or livestock, inability to engage in normal means of living or reduced remuneration and/or separation from family and community due to death or displacement. Food aid normally forms an important component of the basic relief package, which ideally also includes clean water, emergency health care and shelter.

However, while the first priority of organizations like the World Food Programme is to use food aid to address the needs of those who are unable to meet their current needs and are at risk of death in the short term, there is growing recognition that food aid and other assistance can save more lives in the long term if it is also provided to those whose livelihoods are at risk of failure. This requires broadening the traditional focus of humanitarian assistance - those who have already depleted their assets and are destitute - to include those who risk losing their assets. By targeting the latter group with food aid and other relief assistance, humanitarian organizations can help prevent them from depleting their assets, thus supporting an entire community's capacity to cope with crisis today and avoiding negative impacts to their health and future well being.

Providing food and other relief assistance in ways that supports livelihoods is not without its challenges, however, and may not always be appropriate. The many challenges that thwart relief efforts in complex emergencies, such as access constraints, insecurity, targeting dilemmas and weak local/national capacity, may be even more acute when attempting to programme assistance in ways that support livelihoods. Supporting livelihoods requires careful analysis of all these constraints, along with early intervention, good multi-sectoral programming, strong partnerships and adequate resources.

Part one of this paper summarizes the key characteristics of complex emergencies and the related operational challenges faced by WFP in providing food assistance in this context. Part two explores the relevance of using food aid to protect livelihoods and the challenges of adopting a livelihoods approach in complex emergencies. Finally part three outlines key implications for programming to support livelihoods in complex emergencies.

I. Meeting the challenges of working in complex emergencies

Characteristics of complex emergencies

The post Cold War period has seen a dramatic rise in the number of internal civil conflicts, which characterize most complex emergencies; in the 1990s, for instance, out of 111 armed conflicts, all but three were internal and half were considered major conflicts (resulting in at least 1000 military deaths) (USAID, 2002). Moreover, conflict, while affecting fewer people than natural disasters, tended to kill up to three times as many and civilians, not soldiers, have become the primary casualties in conflict situations.

While complex emergencies share many characteristics with emergencies stemming from natural disasters, they are distinguished by "a total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict which requires an international response going beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or ongoing UN country programme." (IASC, 1994) More specifically, complex emergencies are characterized by:

- weakened or non-existent public institutions;
- withheld or contested external legitimacy of the state;
- a strong parallel or extra-legal economy;
- existence of, or high susceptibility to, violence;
- forced displacement of refugees and internally displaced people;

- sections of the population deliberately excluded from enjoying basic rights;
- livelihoods highly vulnerable to external shocks. (Le Billon, 2000)

In 2002, WFP assisted 44 million persons through its emergency operations (EMOPs) and 14 million through its protracted relief and recovery operations (PRROs) (WFP, 2003a). Almost half of WFP's total emergency assistance was provided in situations described as complex emergencies (WFP, 2002).

WFP's interventions in complex emergencies are wide-ranging, including distributions of full or partial food rations to the entire affected population or targeted groups therein; support for supplementary feeding; food for work to support agricultural production, restore productive, social or transport infrastructure or promote environmental recovery; school feeding; food for training; and support for demobilization activities. For example:

- In Afghanistan, WFP used food to help create urban and rural productive assets and by supporting school feeding, women's literacy programmes and urban bakeries.
- Forty years of conflict in Colombia has resulted in massive displacement and WFP has been providing food aid to the displaced to encourage their participation in activities focussing on restoring productive and social infrastructure as well as in training and capacity building activities meant to increase their income-earning potential.
- In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, WFP used food aid to rehabilitate rural and social infrastructure (feeder roads, health and sanitation infrastructure); support agricultural production (by distributing food in conjunction with agricultural inputs); and to encourage food-insecure displaced or resettled women to attend vocational training (such as to establish bakeries or to produce soap).
- In Angola, WFP provided food aid to 220,000 demobilized UNITA soldiers and their families while they received training to learn new skills appropriate for their life as civilians.
- In Liberia, WFP adapted its programme to meet the amplified humanitarian needs stemming from the renewed conflict and resumed distributions as early as mid-August 2003. The Programme is now feeding about 150,000 people in the country.

Operational challenges

WFP staff and other humanitarian workers face a number of critical challenges carrying out their work in conflict situations:

Securing full, unimpeded access

Humanitarian access is commonly understood as access for assistance and protection to civilians during armed conflict, as well as military *hors de combat*. It encapsulates issues of freedom of movement of international aid agencies, freedom of access to populations in need and safety and protection of humanitarian personnel, aid and property.

When conflict prevents civilians from accessing food and other essential requirements through normal channels, free passage of relief supplies to civilians in need should be granted, as laid down in the 1949 Geneva Conventions and their two Protocols of 1977. However, as cited by the UN Secretary General in his March 2001 Report to the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict (S/2001/331):

“In many conflicts, safe and unhindered access to vulnerable civilian populations is granted only sporadically, and is often subject to conditions, delayed or even bluntly denied. The consequences for those populations are often devastating: entire communities are deprived of even basic assistance and protection. The agony of civilians in such isolated circumstances is further exacerbated as, in modern warfare, particularly internal conflicts, civilians are often

targeted as part of a political strategy.”

Constraints faced by WFP in securing humanitarian access have included active fighting or general insecurity; deliberate denial of access by state or non-state actors; obstruction of access through road blocks, taxation or refusal to acknowledge the crisis; denial/extortion by non-targeted populations or local interest groups (such as merchants or traders); and logistical difficulties. Consequences have included full or partial inability to deliver essential aid, insufficient needs assessment/monitoring/ evaluation, increased operational costs, deteriorated nutrition status or increased mortality rate among beneficiaries, depleted assets and further erosion of coping mechanisms among beneficiaries, questioning of WFP's impartiality and increased risks for WFP staff.

Directing the right aid to the right people

Determining the number of people in need of assistance and the level of assistance required and keeping up-to-date with changes is particularly difficult in complex emergencies. Clearly, such work is hindered when there is not full, consistent access to affected people and areas. In addition, lack of strong public institutions or reliable government counterparts results in serious information gaps, doubts about the reliability of many data and difficulty in verifying information, particularly in the initial stages of an operation.

These problems are compounded in situations where warring parties seek to provide or withhold food in order to meet their own political/military objectives. Further, as local leaders or controlling factions learn how the assessment and allocation systems work, the reliability of data can decline over time. For instance, WFP staff in Burundi, Liberia and Sierra Leone have reported that making, or obtaining reasonable estimates of the number of people in some areas was the single most important constraint in ration planning. In fact, in areas of high insecurity where access is unpredictable, deliveries erratic and the number of people constantly changing, detailed planning in terms of numbers and nutritional needs becomes virtually meaningless. (WFP, 1999)

Targeting is also challenging in conflict areas. An evaluation of WFP's Liberia operation in 1996 found that, “targeting relief food to the most needy among the afflicted populations has been one of the most difficult issues facing the operation ... even more difficult than reaching the needy areas” (*ibid.*). This is particularly the case when the aid criteria are at odds with local resource-sharing traditions, where insecurity is high and when local authorities attempt to use food aid for political or military objectives. Indeed, targeting is as much a political issue as it is a technical one, and the choices made can have serious impact on both the effectiveness of the assistance, its side-effects and the security risks faced by beneficiaries and staff.

Providing the right form of assistance is also an enormous challenge. The timing of donor food aid contributions often makes it difficult to maintain a reliable pipeline of all necessary commodities throughout the lifecycle of the programme. Moreover, while the benefits of food aid are only fully realized when combined with other types of assistance – such as clean water, adequate health care, non-food items and agricultural and other assistance aimed at restoring livelihoods – such assistance is often not available in sufficient quantities and at the appropriate time.

Preventing misappropriation

Misappropriation of aid, including food commodities, takes many different forms including direct theft from warehouses or during transport, post-distribution “taxation” where recipients are forced to turn over a certain portion of received commodities, over- or under-distribution on the basis of inflated registration or exclusion of marginalized groups, or leakage due to weak staff or implementing partner capacity to carry out needs assessments and implement targeted distributions. In any of its forms, misappropriation is a serious issue as it implies that part of the assistance does not reach the intended beneficiaries. Moreover, misappropriated

commodities could end up playing some role in sustaining belligerents, which is certainly not the intention of humanitarian assistance. (WFP, 2002)

Efforts to prevent misappropriation are necessary at both the national and local levels and have included being party to Codes of Conduct or “ground rules” agreements whereby the objectives of assistance and consequences of misappropriation are agreed to by all humanitarian actors and warring parties, incorporating less desirable commodities in the food aid basket, changing distribution modalities (including timing, frequency, wet feeding versus dry rations), establishing joint registration committees to agree on the caseload and carrying out regular screening and verification exercises. In addition, WFP staff have tried to carry documents from recognized authorities, pay transporters only for commodities delivered and establish good relationships at local level. Withholding aid, suspending activities and pulling out have on occasion been used to respond to gross abuses raising serious ethical dilemmas for staff on the ground. (*ibid.*)

Ensuring staff security

Over 230 UN staff members have died from malicious acts since January 1992, illustrating the extreme danger of the UN's work in complex emergencies (UN, 2002). In addition to death from direct attack, such as the horrendous bombing of the UN facility in Baghdad in August 2003, humanitarian workers have been caught in the cross fire and killed by mine incidents and often face threats, intimidation and kidnapping. In some situations, WFP has been forced to run operations remotely from neighbouring countries/regions which presents a major disadvantage to operations, including adding costs and preventing close relationships with local authorities, the affected populations and partners on the ground.

While the safety of UN personnel is the responsibility of national governments, they are often hard pressed (and, at times, unwilling) to assure the security within the territory that they control and clearly unable to do so in areas controlled by non-state actors. In addition, safety concerns have occasionally been used as an excuse to restrict humanitarian assistance operations in key areas. Emergency managers face the difficult task of striking a balance between the necessity to provide assistance and the security of staff, which, in addition to keeping field presence in danger areas to a minimum, involves equipping staff to handle a range of potential threats to their own security, ensuring staff are aware of their own responsibility in this respect and providing essential background information on the context of the crisis.

Managing relief

In the absence or disruption of normal government structures and civil society institutions in complex emergencies, the United Nations is required, with increasing frequency, to take over responsibility for policy making and coordination for an emergency, in addition to operational aspects. While creating an additional operational challenge to overcome, this has also contributed to a shift in responsibility for assisting needy civilians away from national or local authorities onto humanitarian actors, thus reducing the accountability mechanisms within that society. Different planning and coordination mechanisms have been established to coordinate overall assistance, including the appointment of a Humanitarian Coordinator (by the Emergency Relief Coordinator in consultation with the Interagency Standing Committee), the designation of a lead agency (such as WFP in Southern Africa in 2002) and/or the creation of a UN Transitional Administration (as seen in Kosovo and East Timor).

Limited resources over time

The lack of appropriate resources is often a serious constraint to meeting the humanitarian needs in complex emergencies as it undermines the programming strategy with negative impacts on quality and results of operations. Limited resources often prevent humanitarian agencies from programming the right mix of food and non-food relief assistance to address the total needs resulting from the crisis. Unfortunately, while the high media profile of many

complex emergencies at their onset typically results in substantial initial funding commitments, as conflicts turn into a protracted crisis, “donor fatigue” can set in and resources dwindle, especially as new crises occur elsewhere.

II. Food aid to protect livelihoods

Saving lives and supporting livelihoods

People affected by crises are not passive victims and recipients of aid. To survive and recover they rely primarily on their own capabilities, coping mechanisms, resources and networks – they move in with family members or send their children to do so, draw on savings or take loans, move their herd to an area where there is adequate grazing land, switch to drought-resistant crops or send a breadwinner to find work elsewhere. Even in areas experiencing protracted conflict and forced displacement, many people continue to try to pursue livelihoods and economic activities, be it in rural villages terrorized by rebel militias, urban areas inundated with displaced people, or refugee camps with few assets.

However, many of the strategies that people employ in order to meet their current food needs undermine their health and well-being, along with their ability to meet future food needs and cope with further crises (WFP, 2003b). Crisis-affected people often eat fewer, smaller and less nutritious meals in order to make what they have last longer without depleting their assets. When pastoralists are forced to sell their livestock in distress, they lose access to milk and meat, receive a low price on the market from livestock sales and are gouged once again when they try to replenish their herds in a sellers’ market after the drought has subsided. Similarly, families may mortgage their land or otherwise enter into prohibitive debt in order to meet the short-term needs of their families. Worse still, they may turn to illegal forms of income generation, such as prostitution, theft or trafficking, or they migrate from their homes to survive, losing access to their primary means of living and the communities and networks on which they would normally rely in times of stress.

Women and woman-headed households face particular risk from negative coping strategies. Women are most likely to bear the brunt of food shortages, affecting their health as well as the health and long-term potential of their unborn or young children. They often assume new responsibilities for their families’ safety and economic well-being and security, as their husbands seek employment elsewhere or are conscripted into armed forces. Girls are the first to be pulled out of school or face early marriage when household livelihoods are at risk, and women may even risk sexual abuse or enter into prostitution to protect their families’ lives and livelihoods. (*ibid.*)

Protecting and supporting livelihoods as a component of an emergency response has a number of benefits:

- It is instrumental in safeguarding food security and people’s productive capacity;
- It builds recovery into the emergency response;
- It contributes to reducing relief dependency and can be cost-effective since families will protect their livelihoods for as long as possible. By the time people need relief to survive, their livelihoods are often already lost and thus they need to rely on relief for much longer; and
- It is participatory, responding to what the beneficiaries want and addressing community priorities. (WFP, 2002)

Limitations to protecting livelihoods

While it is increasingly recognized that humanitarian assistance should be used, to the extent possible, to support livelihoods as a part of life-saving strategies, livelihood support is not without its challenges, particularly in the context of complex emergencies where it may place beneficiaries at further risk than basic relief assistance. Any form of humanitarian assistance, when introduced into a complex emergency typically characterized by a resource-strained environment, can play into the dynamics of the conflict. Food aid, as a very visible form of aid, may be particularly subject to manipulation. Assistance can affect the balance of power and may ultimately exacerbate or prolong a crisis even when it is effective in saving lives and alleviating suffering.

As noted earlier, this poses a number of challenges for WFP staff and other humanitarian workers including ensuring that aid reaches the intended beneficiaries with the maximum impact, i.e. that sufficient aid is provided to people who need it, when and where they need it; ensuring that the provision of aid is carried out in an efficient and safe manner for both staff and beneficiaries; and ensuring that relief interventions not only meet the beneficiaries immediate needs, but also do no harm.

These challenges are amplified when seeking to provide livelihoods support in complex emergencies making the provision of such assistance, at times, both a difficult and dangerous endeavour. Complex emergencies may last for years with sustained violence and insecurity, asset depletion and chronic displacement separating people from their traditional means of livelihoods. The prolonged nature of such situations may distort the systems on which livelihoods are based so significantly as to render previous livelihoods completely unsustainable. In addition, the violence associated with complex emergencies is mainly targeted at civilians and in particular at their livelihood systems; warring strategies may be designed less for winning army-to-army engagements than for achieving maximum disruption of life at the community level. As such, undermining livelihoods in complex emergencies is not only a side-effect of the conflict but often a war tactic in itself. (Pain & Lautze, 2002)

Viewed from this perspective, assistance operations that seek to support livelihoods could run in direct opposition to the objectives that warring parties are seeking, possibly leading belligerents to deliberately block assistance efforts for tactical reasons. Worse still, they may engage in targeted attacks against the beneficiary community because they are receiving such assistance, thus increasing their vulnerability. Indeed, the very fact that interventions designed to support livelihoods are intended to have a long-term impact may make them suspect in the eyes of belligerents, because building the capacity of one livelihood group could imply strengthening one side in a conflict at the expense of another. (Young *et al*, 2001)

Given these dangers, it is critical that humanitarian assistance providers have a clear understanding of the political/military context in which they are operating before engaging in livelihood support activities. Moreover, livelihood support in complex emergencies should proceed only on the basis of careful analysis, sound programming, and strong partnerships.

Refugee, and some internally displaced, situations provide both serious constraints and potential opportunities for supporting livelihoods. Refugees and IDPs may have limited access to land, livestock, jobs or other sources of livelihood during their time of refuge, which limits their ability to pursue livelihood strategies. Security may also be an issue. Refugees in camps located near national borders may risk attack or conscription, which can compromise any efforts to rebuild or restore assets, and travel by aid workers to these areas may be difficult. Women face particular risk of abuse in implementing their livelihood strategies.

Linking livelihoods during refuge or displacement to livelihoods once refugees or displaced people return home or are resettled also pose challenges. The actions required to help re-establish their livelihoods, or develop new ones, once they return home or are resettled are not always well understood. If funding shortfalls occur during the repatriation/resettlement process, returnees may not receive the assistance that they need in order to retain, restore

or develop livelihoods. Moreover, there may be transportation constraints that have an impact on the assets that refugees are permitted to repatriate, as is the case in Guinea for the Sierra Leonean refugees. (WFP, 2002)

Despite these challenges, in refugee camps, the existence of an UNHCR-led coordination structure to bring food and non-food assistance together under a common strategy could permit close linkages among sectors, which are essential for livelihood interventions. In addition, most refugee camps have functioning markets and some opportunities for labour - within the camp if not outside - which can support livelihood strategies.

For instance, a recent WFP case study in Guinea (WFP, 2003c) found that refugees can be engaged as skilled and unskilled labour in support of the relief effort (setting up tents, building health centres and sanitation systems, making bricks for sale to relief agencies); can trade with other refugees or the host population (offering services or selling produce cultivated in small gardens, fish or processed goods); or can participate in small income-generation activities (such as tailoring or bread-making). The recently updated WFP–UNHCR Memorandum of Understanding highlights the importance of efforts to support asset-building activities and encourage the self-reliance of beneficiaries, which is a step in the right direction.

In addition to these issues, food aid is not always the most appropriate resource when seeking to preserve assets or support livelihoods. Livelihood interventions must be based on careful analysis of the current availability and accessibility of food for crisis-affected people, the impact that the crisis has had on men's and women's assets and livelihood strategies, and the role that food aid could play in both preserving assets and meeting household consumption needs. It is also important to take into account the impact that food aid would have on the policies, institutions and processes that influence livelihood strategies, particularly markets. Where food is available on the market and people simply do not have the means to gain access to it without depleting essential assets, cash interventions may be a preferred mode of response. (WFP, 2002)

III. Implications for programming

Over the years, WFP has accumulated a substantial body of experience addressing the challenges associated with working in complex emergencies. These have ranged from very practical steps - such as switching to less desirable commodities to prevent misappropriation, consulting beneficiaries regarding the timing and mechanisms of distribution to reduce risks, ensuring that the needs of host communities were met along with those of displaced people and refugees - to protracted negotiations with governments and non-state actors. Such interventions have been most successful when conducted as a collaborative effort with UN agencies, NGOs and other members of the international community and on the basis of a sound understanding of the context in which aid was being delivered.

Much of the experience gained providing relief in complex emergencies also applies to efforts to provide assistance to support livelihoods. Clearly, many of the techniques that underlie strong programming of basic relief assistance - good planning, programme design on the basis of solid assessments and analysis, adjusting implementation and the future course of activities on the basis of ongoing monitoring - also apply to livelihood support activities. In addition to these, however, there are particular implications for programming livelihood support assistance in complex emergencies. The range of essential skills include the need to:

- *Understand the new dimension of risk.* The risks engendered by conflict create vulnerabilities that are specific to households and their livelihood systems. These vulnerabilities result from the households' inability to counter external threats arising from conflicts rather than from random afflictions such as the ones caused by natural disasters. It is thus critical to analyse the violent processes that distort the environment in which

livelihoods are pursued and livelihoods outcomes are realised. At the same time and in the light of political analyses of war economies, it is critical to develop concomitant strategies for protecting those whose livelihoods we are trying to protect. (Pain & Lautze, 2002)

- *Link pre-emergency interventions to emergency response.* Humanitarian organizations should link early warning, contingency planning, vulnerability analysis and both emergency and longer-term programmes in a comprehensive process that builds communities' resilience to the hazards and risks that they are likely to face. Simple community-based indicators can be adopted to track changes in vulnerability over time (such as asset sales, changes in food security status, increase in school drop-out rates and malnutrition levels, changes in overall health status, etc).
- *Integrate livelihood assessments into emergency needs assessments.* Even in quick-onset emergencies where detailed assessment may not initially be possible, livelihood assessments should be carried out at a later stage, after the initial response has occurred. Such assessments should document the livelihood strategies that women and men are pursuing, the assets that they rely on for their livelihoods, the policies, institutions and processes that influence their ability to pursue their means of living, and household coping strategies. They should also outline the differences between the strategies adopted and the risks faced by men and by women within a household, indicate when food aid is an appropriate response (and when it is not), and clarify the non-food strategies that are required to support livelihoods.
- *Improve timing of interventions.* Emergency interventions, including emergency food aid programmes, must occur early enough to reduce the need for negative coping strategies. This requires incorporating risks to livelihoods in early warning efforts and ensuring effective links among early warning, preparedness and response. It will also need to involve quicker and more predictable access to full funding for their activities.
- *Advocate for those at risk of losing livelihoods.* Humanitarian organizations should advocate for the needs of those at risk of losing their livelihoods, in addition to those whose lives are at more immediate risk. Situations where food assistance plays an important role in preserving assets and supporting livelihoods may require a larger quantity of food aid than activities aimed at meeting the immediate survival needs of the destitute. Target groups may be larger, because they include people who still have assets, and there may be additional staff and other costs. Livelihood-support interventions will also require complementary inputs from partners. Staff should know and be able to incorporate into advocacy messages when food aid is an appropriate response and when it is not.
- *Build strong partnerships.* Partnerships with organizations that understand the needs of communities and are open to a livelihood approach should be promoted. For WFP, this would involve proactively seeking to bring partners, particularly community-based organizations, into its assessment, analysis and programme design processes in order to expand the possibilities of, and scope for, preserving assets and supporting livelihoods in emergencies. In addition, support for twinning arrangements between larger international NGOs with experience in supporting livelihoods in emergencies and smaller, indigenous organizations that bring community-level knowledge should be encouraged. WFP should also seek partnerships with governments, United Nations agencies and NGOs that can couple non-food resources with the food resources provided by WFP. This should include working closely with UNHCR to review further the potential of efforts to support refugee livelihoods.
- *Brush up on the basics.* Many of the skills needed to support livelihoods are the same as those that are needed generally to promote sound programming. All staff who work in emergencies should have the capacity to conduct participatory assessments, design and implement effective programmes, monitor the impact of their activities, and incorporate

gender considerations. Such an effort should include capacities that are specifically relevant to efforts to support livelihoods, but should not be limited to this. In addition, staff need to be able to determine whether partners are capable of designing and implementing food-based projects to preserve assets and support livelihoods, or what capacities they would need to do so.

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