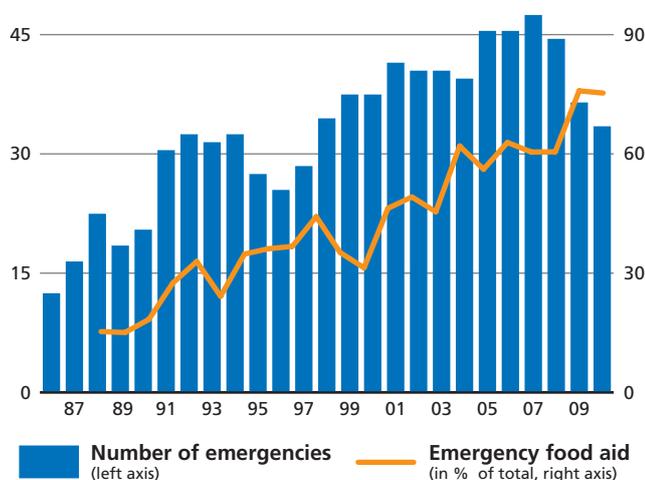


Making the Food Aid Convention meet the realities of the 21st century

Some proposals for more effective interventions

Emergency situations have become increasingly frequent over the past 25 years, often coupled with acute and chronic food insecurity in the affected countries. International responses to these crises have generally focused on addressing immediate humanitarian needs, as evidenced by the growing share of food aid that is channelled to emergencies (Figure 1). However, achieving lasting food security would often require an integrated development approach that combines short-term relief measures with longer-term mitigation strategies. A reformed Food Aid Convention (FAC) could provide the institutional framework for more effective interventions.

Figure 1: Emergencies and emergency food aid



Source: GIEWS and FAIS Database (2010).

What is the Food Aid Convention?

Several arrangements govern food-related assistance at the international level. Among these, the Food Aid Convention is of particular importance as it is the only legal instrument to ensure a minimum amount of food aid.¹

Created in 1967 to “carry out a food aid programme with the help of contributions for the benefit of developing countries”, the FAC has been renewed several times with the latest Convention dating from 1999. Over the years, the components of the

- Food-related assistance needs have changed
- The lack of a coherent multilateral framework that governs food aid interventions reduces their effectiveness
- Reforming the Food Aid Convention could be an important first step

Convention have largely remained unchanged. Notable modifications include the expansion of eligible contributions beyond grains (e.g. pulses, root crops and sugar) and a focus on broader development and food security concerns.

Despite these adjustments, many believe that the Convention is no longer adapted to today’s food-related assistance needs. Indeed the current Convention was set to expire in 2002, and has been extended repeatedly since then. Formal renegotiations were put on hold as members wanted to await the outcomes of the agriculture negotiations of the WTO Doha Round, especially those related to food aid.

New challenges, old mechanisms

It is increasingly recognized that tackling an emergency by solely covering immediate humanitarian needs will not provide a sustainable solution. Interventions should instead have a longer-term horizon and address the underlying reasons for food insecurity. Such comprehensive responses include measures to increase agricultural productivity, supporting marketing channels and the provision of basic inputs for food production.

Current food aid patterns do not reflect this reality. Nearly 80 percent of total assistance is channelled to emergency relief measures, up from less than 20 percent in 1990. While this shift is not surprising considering the marked increase in food crises, it also illustrates that the focus of interventions all too often lies on addressing the symptoms of emergencies, not their causes. Food aid operations that promote agricultural and broader economic development—so-called “project food aid”—accounted for less than 20 percent of the total in 2008.

The strong focus on short-term relief measures, combined with limited support to local agriculture, is not only less effective in overcoming the structural reasons for food insecurity; it might even lower incentives to invest in agriculture and domestic food production.

Recent food security initiatives

The spike in global hunger, following the 2007-08 food price crisis and last year's economic downturn, catalyzed efforts to re-examine food security interventions. This process was fostered by global initiatives to fight hunger more effectively. The G8 Summit in L'Aquila, the reform of the Committee on World Food Security and the World Summit on Food Security (all in 2009) strengthened the move towards comprehensive approaches to food security. Independent of the FAC, several donors have already started re-adjusting their interventions.

While food aid was traditionally delivered as in-kind support, a growing number of donors now rely on procurement mechanisms in the target countries themselves. Local purchases are generally cheaper than in-kind aid and can generate development benefits to local markets and farmers.

Some donors also strive for a better integration of emergency interventions and longer-term development operations. The European Union, for example, envisages a rapid handover to structural food security mechanisms when responding to emergencies. Such measures should rebuild the livelihoods of affected populations and strengthen their resilience to future crises.

These examples illustrate a fundamental departure from *ad hoc* and partial approaches to food security interventions followed in the past. They also demonstrate a general agreement among donors on the principles that should guide food aid interventions.

Towards a new Food Aid Convention?

The reform process of the FAC has been dormant largely due to the uncertain Doha Round negotiations. Considering the high degree of convergence as regards the food aid disciplines in the *Draft Modalities for Agriculture*, the revision of the FAC might nevertheless

move forward and be concluded without further delay. The specific provisions of the new Convention would then have to be incorporated and "legalized" under the eventual Doha Round agreement. The following changes seem feasible:

The new FAC could consider incorporating agricultural inputs—such as seeds, fertilizers, and farming tools—as part of the contributions of donors under the Convention. This would help expedite the recovery of emergency-struck countries and avoid their continuing dependence on outside food assistance. Considering that many new donors have started providing food aid (e.g. China, the Republic of Korea and the Russian Federation) the reformed FAC might also broaden its member base to better represent ongoing initiatives.

As current resources barely cover emergency needs, raising FAC minimum commitments would be an essential component of the reform. Providing adequate funding to the Convention would also make good economic sense as last-minute interventions tend to be more costly. If genuine needs turn out to be smaller than expected, flexible funding arrangements could allow donors to shift contributions between budgeting years. This would increase the effectiveness of the Convention by making more resources and funding available when emergencies arise.

It is a welcome coincidence that the re-thinking of donor food security strategies takes place at a time when key international mechanisms related to food assistance are in the process of negotiation. The Food Aid Convention should use this window of opportunity to better adjust to the realities of the 21st century.

1 Pledges specify an amount of food to be contributed, regardless of the current price. As of December 2009, the member states of the Food Aid Convention were: Argentina, Australia, Canada, the European Union and its member States, Japan, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States.

Further information

- **Konandreas, P. (2010):** Promoting agricultural inputs under the Food Aid Convention to increase food production in emergency-prone developing countries, FAO Working Paper. www.fao.org/emergencies/resources/publications
- **The State of Food Insecurity in the World - Addressing Food Insecurity in Protracted Crises**, FAO 2010. www.fao.org/publications/sofi

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