



Productive safety nets

In order to fight hunger a twin-track approach remains key, involving both measures for immediate relief and more fundamental structural changes. In the **short term, safety nets and social protection programmes** must be improved to reach those most in need. Simultaneously, **small-scale farmers must be given access to indispensable tools and technologies** that will allow them to boost production. These include high-quality seeds, fertilizers, and adequate farming equipments. Higher local production will be instrumental to lower food prices for poor consumers, both rural and urban. In the **medium and long term**, the structural solution to hunger lies in **increasing agricultural output in countries prone to food shortages**. Stable and effective policies, regulatory and institutional mechanisms, and functional market infrastructures that promote investment in the agricultural sector are paramount (FAO 2009) for the sustainable intensification of production systems.

In the face of rising food prices, programmes can be initiated that will help increase supply response in the short term. They can comprise production schemes that promote home gardens and off-season utilization of irrigated land for producing short duration vegetables or other crops. This could result in food production within weeks in areas where weather and water resources permit.

In preparation for the next agricultural season, steps can also be taken to facilitate the procurement and distribution of farm inputs at national (or even regional) level by the provision of funds and/or credit facilities to private operators. Some of these inputs could be distributed through **productive safety nets (i.e. small packs of seeds and fertilizer) or cash transfer programmes** to alleviate credit constraints and promote some smallholder investment. Alternatively some “smart subsidies” for agricultural



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inputs (subsidized seeds and fertilizers, voucher systems for inputs) can increase food production for own consumption or for sale in local markets thus reducing local prices and alleviating some of the pressures from food prices. Modalities for these activities have to be carefully designed to ensure that they **do not undermine existing market processes** or, better, that **they help develop them in areas where they are weak or inexistent**.

Boosting production in the short-term

To boost production in the short term, a number of measures can be envisaged that result in the provision of inputs. Initial assessments to identify vulnerable farmers and determine the right crops and appropriate varieties of seed are critical. Inputs can be provided in a range of

ways that include direct distribution to farmers, input trade fairs, voucher, credit schemes etc. The inputs can also be provided along with food rations to help ensure that the inputs are used for agricultural production. High quality seed of appropriate crops and varieties will be provided from local sources to ensure that they are adapted to local conditions and are preferred by farmers and consumers.

Procurement and distribution of inputs need to be monitored so that farmers obtain inputs meeting established quality standards. The use of existing mechanisms for the effective supply of productive inputs to farmers and the marketing of surplus production are integral elements of any productive safety net to support sustainability. Care must be taken to avoid disruption of commercial markets. Where warranted, attention will be given to alternative supply systems that are more private sector-oriented.

Lessons learned from emergency agriculture input distribution projects

- Seed and fertilizers distribution programmes should only be used to **complement other policies and existing programmes** and never as an isolated strategy. Short-term measures should be done in the context of medium- to long-term approaches.
- The **strengthening of local seed systems** is considered more important than the (free) distribution of inputs: there is a risk of undermining local seed producers by bringing seeds from outside.
- **Distribution of inputs without training or other associated technical assistance is of limited use.** Any agriculture input distribution programme should be accompanied by training and complemented by policy advice on how to strengthen the resilience of the agricultural sector.
- Systems used to distribute inputs need to consider the countries' reality:
 - **Distribution through government institutions** can be effective due to their extended coverage, reach and possibilities of integration with existing government programmes. Attention should be paid, however to: i) political influence in the choice of beneficiaries; ii) the capacity of line agencies to effectively distribute inputs and provide training on its use; and iii) the capacity of institutions to ensure that good quality inputs are delivered and that suppliers are held accountable for the quality of the products they supply. There is a need for beneficiaries to be fully informed and sensitized (publish, advertise) on the process and conditions of distribution. This will help to avoid distortion of targeting for local personal or political aims.
 - **Distribution of inputs through input trade fairs (ITF)** has many benefits. Farmers are able to choose the types of inputs they want, project implementers are able to reduce time and costs, and the ITFs provide a boost to the local economy and local agricultural input markets. However, such input trade fairs can only work in countries



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where markets are functioning. There are of course risks with regards to corruption, forgery of vouchers, price fixing and lack of quality or quantity of inputs. Measures need to be considered to mitigate such problems.

- **Distribution through NGOs or farmers groups** has proven itself to be an effective way of targeting and distributing inputs to beneficiaries. If they have technical knowledge on the crops being produced this can help to ensure that farmers are properly trained on the use of inputs.
- **Distribution by input suppliers** might assure that beneficiaries are better informed on the use of the inputs.
- The use of **revolving schemes or equity contribution systems** should be considered. Such systems can help to ensure continuity in project investments after it has been completed. The use of revolving schemes, where beneficiaries pay back seeds they have received after the harvest or pay a subsidized amount for inputs in cash that can subsequently be used to buy more inputs or be invested in microprojects, can also help to improve ownership in the project, targeting and use of inputs received by the beneficiaries.
- **Consider the geographic context of the country.** Countries that face accessibility problems, such as island nations and mountainous countries, require more time and money for implementation. Often, the needed inputs cannot be procured locally and require purchasing from international sources which takes time to deliver. Once the inputs arrive in the country, the transportation costs and time to deliver to isolated areas must be properly considered in the project planning stages.
- **Avoid distribution of live animals unless proper transportation to the beneficiary's farm can be assured.** The provision and transport of live animals needs careful consideration and planning in order to avoid the risk of high mortality rates. Proper transport arrangements need to be assured all the way to the farm of the beneficiary.
- **Encourage stronger donor commitment with government engagement** in following up short-term emergency projects with medium- term investments to address structural problems within the agriculture sector.

References

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