

## Human Security Policy Briefing Note 1

# FOOD AID

### What is Food Aid?

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that 820 million people in developing countries are suffering from malnutrition. Despite the universal recognition of every person's right to food, vulnerability to hunger remains a daily reality for many. Over the last few decades, aid in the form of food has been a popular way of addressing the symptoms of global malnutrition.

There are three types: relief, programme and project food aid. Relief food aid is delivered in times of crisis direct to people. Programme food aid is food provided directly to a government for sale on local markets – this type of aid usually comes with some form of condition from the donor. Project food aid is food targeted at specific groups as part of longer-term development work.

Food aid can be delivered as a 'general ration' to meet the full requirements of a targeted population, but can also be delivered as supplementary or therapeutic feeding to specific groups at risk or suffering from malnutrition (pregnant women, people living with HIV). It can also be delivered as 'Food for Work' where a wage is paid in food on a self-selection basis.

### Who is doing what on Food Aid?

The USA and EU together provide about two thirds of global food aid deliveries. The global impacts of food aid and the management of specific programmes are therefore largely determined by the practices of these major donors.

At the international level, food aid is governed by several multilateral organisations, the most important ones being the UN World Food Programme (WFP), the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Food Aid Convention (FAC) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). All these organisations have different mandates and are concerned with different aspects of the provision of food aid.

The EU Commission's position is clear: food aid in kind is not an appropriate instrument to create long-term food security. The EU has stipulated that food aid should, where possible, be sourced locally.

The USA is by far the most important donor of food aid both for bilateral programme aid and as the main contributor to the WFP. The US government had been at the forefront of efforts to limit aid untying – after all almost all the food donated by the US consists of surplus stocks.

### What's the problem?

For the last two decades, the provision of food aid to developing countries has been controversial. In theory, the provision of lifesaving food should be a positive step towards meeting people's right to food. In practice, food aid is expensive (transportation costs etc) and often has a detrimental impact on the lives of the most vulnerable people in recipient countries and reduces food security.

The main problem arises with food aid's negative impact on domestic production. Imported food aid can flood markets, lower prices and put farmers out of business. US imports of food aid have had huge impacts on local economies in Africa. Some maintain that by undermining recipient nations' domestic economies through food donations, the US has served to ensure market dominance for its own exports. Certainly, the dumping of subsidised surpluses on to Southern markets can no longer be viewed as "aid".

## What ActionAid says

### **“Humanitarian need comes first”**

Food aid should be distributed according to need alone irrespective of gender, race, religion, political affiliation or social class. It should be conducted in a transparent manner that assures participation of communities in planning and distribution.

**Key message: lives must not be lost due to hunger, but food aid may not always be appropriate. ActionAid believes that money rather than the import of food may be a better solution.**

### **“Untie aid”**

There should be no strings attached to food aid. Recipient countries and communities should not be required to meet conditions that are not relevant to ensuring timely, appropriate and adequate delivery of food assistance to those in need.

The US is the main contributor to the WFP. The Food Aid Convention - to which the US is a signatory - recommends local purchasing of grain and says it is good practice to give cash (and not ‘tied aid’) to the WFP to buy crops from local and regional markets.

**Key message: ActionAid calls on the US (specifically USAID) to ‘untie’ its food aid policy and stop insisting on donating food, specifically GM crops, in kind. The recommendations of the Food Aid Convention should be adhered to.**

### **“Avoid dependency”**

Food aid should not make people dependent on an external supply of food. Food aid begun as short-term relief should not be extended as long-term food aid programmes, and should be implemented in ways that do not compromise self-sufficiency. The potential negative impacts of food aid on local production and markets should be taken into account when planning and implementing aid response.

**Key message: ActionAid believes that food import or export should be guided by availability of food and not by the pressure of external food surpluses.**

### **“Food aid must be appropriate and acceptable to the local context”**

During food crises, ActionAid encourages regional sourcing of culturally acceptable crops. Recipients of food aid have a right to make informed choices about the kind of assistance being offered.

**Key message: ActionAid believes that food must be appropriate and acceptable to recipient countries. AA supports the right of recipient countries to reject GM food aid.**

### **“Donors and western governments must pledge adequate funding”**

Sufficient funding should be made available to enable humanitarian agencies and/or recipient governments to provide appropriate assistance. Donors should provide monetary donations rather than food to allow for flexibility and ensure cost effectiveness.

**Key message: ActionAid calls for governments to make financial donations not food donations. In particular ActionAid urges that the US government be stopped in pressurising poor countries to accept food as aid.**

## Further Information

For quotes or further information please contact [yasmin.mcdonnell@actionaid.org](mailto:yasmin.mcdonnell@actionaid.org) or [jack.campbell@actionaid.org](mailto:jack.campbell@actionaid.org) on the International Emergencies and Conflict Team. This briefing note is based on Food Aid: An ActionAid Briefing Paper (2003). For a more in-depth discussion on the issues around food aid and ActionAid’s position, download this document at [http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc\\_lib/food\\_aid\\_background\\_briefing\\_paper.pdf](http://www.actionaid.org.uk/doc_lib/food_aid_background_briefing_paper.pdf)