

Disaster Response – another important and fundamental lesson!

Disasters affect men and women differently, a fact that must be well understood and integrated into relief and recovery planning and execution.

Women and men exhibit different coping strategies and prioritize different needs in post-disaster situations. Therefore in post-disaster relief and recovery, particularly in terms of food security, understanding social and economic relations between and among men and women is critical to defining needs, roles and types of interventions. With respect to agriculture, it should be noted that a large proportion of the agricultural sector is made up of women. FAO estimates, on average, that women produced between 60-80% of the food in the developing world (Trujillo 2000). Given this significant contribution, it is noteworthy that in post-disaster agricultural recovery, the importance of gender is often neglected. Few, if any, calculations are made of losses of 'female' crops and "agricultural recovery from disasters is a responsibility that women are left to shoulder largely on their own" (Trujillo 2000:1).⁵

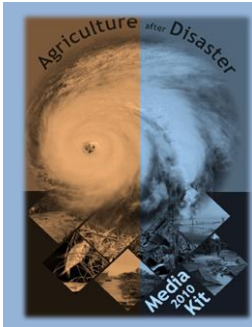
Gender issues play an important role in ensuring food security in emergencies.

Risk and disaster management must recognize the importance of and mainstream a gender perspective in disaster risk management, reduction and communications, training and education initiatives. There is a view that gender equality is possibly the single most important goal in the field of disaster reduction as without it no risk and vulnerability reduction can be achieved in an effective and sustainable manner. It is condition sine qua non for the achievement of disaster reduction objectives. Gender equality is not a separate topic, but rather a cross cutting element that needs to be considered in an integrated manner in ALL development projects or activities if we are to achieve sustainable development in our societies.⁶

The bottom line!

- Disasters disrupt economic activity and put stress on food production and distribution systems!
- After a disaster, the need for reducing human suffering by meeting basic needs takes priority!
- Food is an essential part of the basic needs that must be provided immediately after disaster!
- Emergency food aid fills the vacuum left after disaster and is essential to relief efforts!
- Local authorities must guard against creating a dependence on food aid at the expense of rebuilding local food production capacity and distribution networks!
- Effective use of short term emergency aid could act as the catalyst for a new agriculture.

⁵ O'Keefe and Kirby (1997: 2), cited in Questioning Seeds and Tools: Emerging Strategies in Post-Disaster Seed Relief and Rehabilitation by Caroline Eberdt
⁶ Statement by Mr. Sálvamo Briceño, Director, Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (Geneva), at the High Level Panel to Commemorate International Women's Day 8 March 2005.



4. Securing Food Supplies after Disasters

Small-holder farmers are the heart and soul of food security and poverty reduction. Our job is not just to feed the hungry but to empower the hungry to feed themselves.
Ban Ki-moon, United Nations General Secretary

Key Messages:

- Food, water, clothing, medicines and housing are the most basic needs to reduce human suffering after disaster!
- Emergency aid, including food and water, provides much needed relief after disaster!
- Rebuilding local food supplies soon after a disaster is essential to revitalize agriculture and avoid building-in dependence on external food aid!
- Strategy to move from relief to recovery must include reforms that address the underlying issues of food security!
- A robust and efficient agriculture helps people get back on their feet faster and with less need for emergency aid!

Food is a basic human right

Agriculture is perhaps man's most important endeavour because it is the means of producing food.

Increasing populations and the consequent rising demand for food is a long-standing challenge for Caribbean countries. Despite their efforts to substantially increase food production capacity, the region's annual food import bill stands at roughly US\$4 billion. Experts agree that the region would have to double food production significantly to meet the new demands. However, the capacity to expand food production is challenged by land and watershed degradation, due in part to poor agricultural practices, deforestation and unregulated hillside housing developments. These capacity problems are further exacerbated by the increasing frequency and severity of disasters triggered by one or more natural hazard. When disasters triggered by natural hazards strike, they not only take a heavy toll on human life and cause serious damage to the food production sector, but also jeopardize the most basic of the human rights – the right to food. Food, a necessity for both survival and health, is at the heart of life and livelihoods of people throughout the Caribbean.

Meeting food needs after disaster

A well-nourished population provides an important foundation block for the re-invigoration of private and public life.

The availability of food and water enhances security and stability in a post-disaster environment, hence its priority in relief and recovery efforts. Recent events in the Caribbean have underscored the need for countries of the region to display higher levels of preparedness in this important area, in the wake of challenges posed by hurricanes, earthquakes, unseasonal heavy rainfall, drought and volcanic emergencies. In many instances, there is heavy reliance on external benefactors for immediate relief and the provision of special fiscal support for longer-term recovery. In post-disaster situations, when local food supplies are disrupted, there is one immediate way of obtaining much needed food supplies until local capacity can be restored – food aid.

Prioritizing agriculture in post-disaster relief

Food aid can be an essential and integral component of post-disaster crisis situations to ensure food supplies after disaster.

Food aid originated in the United States (US) in 1954 as a strategic response to Cold War politics, as a development aid strategy to provide resources to developing countries and as a market expansion strategy to find new outlets for surplus production. In July 1954, the U.S. Congress passed Public Law 480. The law authorized concessional sales and donations of food commodities to developing countries, with the explicit intention of developing future commercial markets in those countries. PL-480 established the U.S. as the world's primary source of food aid, a status it retains today.

Emergency Food Aid is now a widespread practice in several countries of the world as a direct and central measure for free distribution to people to combat acute food shortage, extreme poverty, drought and famine. In 2004, about half of all food aid was managed by multilateral agencies, a share which has been growing steadily over the past two decades. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP), established in 1962, which handles about 98 percent of multilateral food aid, dominating global food aid distribution.¹

“The general objective of food aid is to help support food security by addressing, in a timely and appropriate manner, problems arising from food shortages or deficits, whether they are caused by structural deficiencies, or crisis situations calling for emergency actions. The long-term objective is to prevent crises and to correct structural deficiencies by supporting overall development and taking actions aimed directly at vulnerable groups. In this context, food aid plays a positive role, whether it is supplied as foodstuffs, or through the use of counterpart funds generated through local sales.”²

The largest emergency food aid program in the Caribbean is in Haiti. Roughly two weeks after the 2010 January 12th earthquake, the UN WFP urgently appealed to governments for more cash for food for Haiti - \$800 million to feed 2 million people through December, more than quadruple the \$196 million already pledged. This was in addition to the confirmation by the USAID the day after the earthquake that 14,550 tons of food aid to help feed 1.2 million people for two weeks, valued at approximately \$18 million, was being provided.

Food aid as emergency relief is ‘like helping people who have fallen over a cliff; longer term agricultural development provides a fence that stops them from falling in the first place’ (IRRI, 2008). After disaster, the expectation of international relief, including food aid, could delay the reforms that address the underlying issues of food security, including governments’ on investments in disaster mitigation.³ Among the numerous doubts and criticisms levied at the Food Aid programs has been that ‘it acts as a subsidy for inept planners; the same can be said for governments in the face of disasters’, which could have adverse long-term impacts on local food production capacity and food demand patterns in developing countries.

¹ U.S. Food Aid: Time to Get It Right; the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, Written by Sophia Murphy and Kathy McAfee, Published July 2005.
² Official Text of the Food Aid Charter, unanimously adopted by CILSS member nations and Club du Sahel donor countries (Canada, European Economic Community, Germany, France, Netherlands, United States). It was formally approved by CILSS heads of state at their summit meeting in Guinea Bissau on 10 February 1990.
³ Impact of climate change on Food security in Bangladesh: Gender and disaster perspectives, Mahbuba Nasreem, PhD, University of Dhaka, International Symposium on Climate Change and Food Security in South Asia, Bangladesh, 25-30 August, 2008

Rebuilding local food production capacity

Providing access to an appropriate mix of vegetable seeds and other planting material to farmers is one sure way to rebuild local food supplies after a disaster.

Disasters triggered by many natural or man-made hazards will hurt any country, but a robust and efficient agricultural sector helps people get back on their feet faster and with less need for emergency aid. Getting farmers back to the fields and improving productivity is important in helping developing countries to limit the period of reliance on international emergency food relief.

The strategy seems simple: crops varieties selected must be nutritious, hardy, fast - growing, have low input requirements and relatively free of pest and disease problems. The associated improved production technologies relating to efficient cultivation and field management must also be well understood and followed. To assure productivity, farmers should be consulted in the process of crop selection. Efficiency in distribution of the improved genetic stock is also an important part of the process where local authorities must play a leading role in ensuring that the seeds get to the right farmers as soon as the disaster impact is assessed.

The immediate distribution of seeds and tools in post-disaster relief situation can fast-track benefits of a catch-crop in the first available season as well as recovery of rural livelihood systems.⁴

‘Seed distribution can help re-establish a ‘self-help’ mode within communities by helping families to produce their own food and support their livelihoods’. Though a short-term response measure, ‘seed distributions are also often perceived to be a more long-term and effective activity than short-term food aid’ (Bryce 2001).

The importance of restoring productive capacity after a disaster is underscored by the documents experiences from Myanmar following the devastation caused cyclones in 2008 and 2009. A team from the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) concluded that the key needs of the country were for more fertilizer for high-yielding varieties, improved production of high-quality seed and fruit tree seedlings and vegetable seeds to be supplied to affected communities. In addition, the government requested IRRI to facilitate access to seeds of salt-tolerant rice varieties as farmers reported failures of crop establishment following direct seeding after the storm, probably because of high salinity levels.

However, there are issues regarding the pros and cons of seed-based relief and rehabilitation interventions on crop diversity.

Seed distributions are the post-disaster strategies that have the most direct impact on biodiversity. Arguments and experiences suggest that seed distributions that concentrate too heavily on one type of seeds may not adequately take into account all of the factors involved in sustaining local biodiversity and productive and farming systems.

⁴ Questioning Seeds and Tools: Emerging Strategies in Post-Disaster Seed Relief and Rehabilitation by Caroline Eberdt