

Statement by the SCN at its 29th Session

Nutrition in Conflict and Crisis

15 March 2002



We, the SCN, recognize that the humanitarian imperative in complex emergencies is all too often frustrated and undermined by the politicization of humanitarian assistance, including food aid allocations.

Further, as a result of narrowing diplomatic, political and economic engagement with marginalized countries, donor priorities have moved away from funding longer term development needs to a concentration on disaster relief. This has created a situation where humanitarian assistance is forced to focus on life saving activities and meeting immediate emergency needs, not in addressing the root causes of hunger and chronic food insecurity. As a result, emergency humanitarian agencies are faced with the double burden of chronic and acute needs.

There are major disparities in international emergency response. "Forgotten" emergencies, those in low profile areas, suffer from a lack of international agency presence, under-resourcing and minimal media coverage. This is clearly linked to the politicization of humanitarian aid and is a major problem of the international aid system that needs to be urgently addressed.

It is now recognized that nutritional outcomes are a result of complex interactions between physiological, socio-economic, cultural and political determinants of malnutrition. However, this is not always reflected in the policies guiding the allocation of resources, and operational practice, of the international community and national governments.

Furthermore, although the current conceptual framework promotes multisectoral interventions, many agencies find it difficult to cover all sectors and there is an increasing tendency towards agency specialization. Although specialization can improve effectiveness of humanitarian intervention, it can also create gaps in intervention capacity and often means that some of the emergency needs of a population are missed. This problem could be resolved through more clearly defined MOUs between agencies.

We, the SCN, recommend the following actions:

1. There is a need for greater resources to be put towards the implementation of longer term more sustainable programmes that promote food security and actively seek to reduce vulnerability and risk of future disaster.
2. Food aid resources should be part of a more flexible system of response to nutrition crises. In addition, more resources should be made available for non food costs required to support nutrition programmes, such as health, water, and sanitation activities, and to promote recovery.
3. The scarcity of resources for humanitarian interventions often requires that aid is targeted to the groups considered most vulnerable. However, vulnerability is often defined using pre-existing assumptions (e.g. women, children, and female headed households), which may or may not hold true within a particular context. It is imperative that vulnerability and population needs be accurately assessed, and assistance allocated accordingly.
4. Food and nutrition interventions in conflict situations require more careful analysis of all the potential impacts (positive and negative) of delivering humanitarian assistance and should seek to maximize good and minimize harm.
5. There is an urgent need for all actors to be engaged in rigorous debates on the complexities of aid in crisis situations. This debate is particularly important between policy-makers and technicians and should be furthered by a careful analysis of the politicization of humanitarian assistance, and particularly of food aid.