

Food and Shelter Standards in Humanitarian Action

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SUMMARY

The number of disasters, both natural as well as man-made, has been increasing in frequency in the recent years. This leads to short as well as long-term effects on food security and shelter, requiring humanitarian assistance. This article aims to identify the principles and standards that are applicable to food and shelter related aid that needs to be provided by the co-operation of the local government as well as the relevant supporting organizations. Also, food and shelter security during a disaster response is achieved through better preparedness. The level of preparedness must include risk assessment, contingency planning, stockpiling of equipment and supplies, emergency services and stand-by arrangements, communications, information management and coordination arrangements between various agencies involved. Discussing these issues would contribute to a better understanding of the implications of the right to adequate food and shelter, which in complex humanitarian emergencies, is one of the key necessities of the affected population.

Keywords: Disaster; food; shelter; humanitarian emergency.

Introduction

The number of disasters has been growing in the recent years. Traditionally, we try to distinguish disasters as “natural” and “man-made”. Increasingly, every contemporary humanitarian crisis is caused by a combination of factors. Most of these disasters have negative short-term as well as long-term effects on food security and shelter, requiring humanitarian assistance.^[1] Nepal has been overwhelmed by the recent massive earthquakes in April and May 2015. The earthquakes are expected to have significant implications for food security and agricultural-based livelihoods, and have also destroyed more than 130,000 houses and damaged more than 85,850 residences. Hence, access to food, maintenance of an adequate nutritional status and providing shelter to the displaced population are critical determinants of people’s survival during the time of a disaster.

This article aims to identify the principles and standards that are applicable to food and shelter related aid which will be provided by the co-operation of relevant institutions (local government, international support organizations, NGOs, donor governments, etc.). Thus, discussing these issues would contribute to a better understanding of the implications of the right to adequate food and shelter, which in complex humanitarian emergencies is one of the key necessities of the affected population.

Protection Principles

The principles of impartiality and non-discrimination apply in emergency situations and humanitarian action.^[2,3] Most humanitarian agencies explicitly apply the principle of non-discrimination in their relief programs. For example, the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief states that

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“aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind”, and that “aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone”.

Commitment Five of the World Food Summit Plan of Action commits States to “Endeavour to prevent and be prepared for natural disasters and man-made emergencies and to meet transitory and emergency food requirements in ways that encourage recovery, rehabilitation, development and a capacity to satisfy future needs”.

Similarly, everyone has the right to adequate housing which includes the right to live in security, peace and dignity, as well as protection from forced eviction and the right to restitution.

Vulnerabilities of the disaster affected population

The food-related aid has to be distributed only on the basis of need, regardless of any other factors. Certain specific groups need to be given special consideration is the assessment of their needs and delivery of aid. This group includes the more vulnerable members of the society like children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, expectant and nursing mothers, refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDP).

The international humanitarian law, article 70(1) states that “in the distribution of relief consignments, priority shall be given to those persons, such as children, expectant mothers, maternity cases and nursing mothers, who, under the Fourth Convention or under this Protocol, are to be accorded privileged treatment or special protection”^[4,5]

Different cultural aspects including certain religious taboos should also always be respected. However, dietary preferences and habits not amounting to taboos may have to be temporarily put aside in order to ensure freedom from hunger and the right to life.

Standards for Food Security and Nutrition

In general, food needs that arise from sudden-impact disasters eg. Earthquake, floods, etc are urgent but temporary, whereas in slow-impact disasters like droughts, civil wars, etc, food needs develop gradually and tend to last longer [6]. Disasters can make pre-existing inequalities worse.

Although the affected state is the main duty-bearers to ensure appropriate management of the food and shelter crisis followed by long-term rehabilitation, humanitarian agencies working alongside the local government also have a responsibility to work with the disaster-affected population in a way that is consistent with the rights.

Food security during a disaster response is achieved through better preparedness. The level of preparedness must include

risk assessment, contingency planning, stockpiling of equipment and supplies, emergency services and stand-by arrangements, communications, information management and coordination arrangements between various agencies involved.

The Sphere handbook states that food security exists “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”^[7]This definition involves the three crucial elements that form the basis of food security: availability, access and utilization.

There are two characteristic phases of an emergency response, the first phase at the onset and during the early stages of an emergency and a second phase, when the situation is stabilized.

During the first phase of acute crisis, the initial energy need is determined based on the available information. To launch an immediate response, multi-sector initial rapid assessments may be sufficient. The quick supply of food saves lives and a standard food ration is provided to the population. People needing additional nutritional requirements (eg, malnourished children, pregnant and breast-feeding mothers, etc) may require an additional ration of food over and above the standard basic ration. Community participation is a key element during this phase.

When the situation is stabilized, the initial figures are then revised based on the circumstances and information available once the food management and monitoring systems are established.

Specific standards developed within the Sphere Project may give an indication of practical implementation of food security.

a. Assessment

Food security Standard 1: Where people are at increased risk of food insecurity, assessments are conducted using accepted methods to understand the type, degree and extent of food insecurity, to identify those most affected and to define the most appropriate response.^[8]

Various quantitative and qualitative tools can be used to monitor the needs (eg joint food assessment missions, vulnerability analysis and mapping [VAM], household food economy assessments). Also, support for people’s coping strategies, resilience and recovery capacities is essential. This assessment along with the study of the coping mechanism of the population would help achieve food security as well as achieve self-reliance. Therefore, while focusing on urgent

and immediate needs, aid programs should also consider longer-term concerns.

Food security standard 2: Where people are at increased risk of under nutrition, assessments

are conducted using internationally accepted methods to understand the type, degree and extent of under nutrition and identify those most affected, those most at risk and the appropriate response.^[9]

It is important to identify groups with the greatest nutritional support needs and the underlying factors that affect the nutritional status. The decision making should analyze this and then develop a framework to appropriately respond to the needs, bearing in mind the capacity to respond.

b. Infant and young child feeding

Suboptimal infant and young child feeding practices increase vulnerability of this group to under nutrition, disease and death. The risks are heightened in disasters which makes them increasingly vulnerable in the emergency phase.

Standard 1: Safe and appropriate infant and young child feeding for the population is protected through implementation of key policy guidance and strong coordination.^[10]

Optimal feeding practices that maximize survival and reduce morbidity in children under 24 months are early initiation of exclusive breastfeeding, exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months, continued breastfeeding to 24 months or beyond, and introduction of adequate, appropriate and safe complementary foods at 6 months.

Standard 2: Mothers and caregivers of infants and young children have access to timely and appropriate feeding support that minimizes risks and optimizes nutrition, health and survival outcomes.^[11]

This can be achieved through giving priority to pregnant and breastfeeding women to access food, cash and/or vouchers. It is also important to incorporate other supportive interventions like integrated skilled breastfeeding counseling, additional nutritional support and linkage to food security programs to ensure access to adequate food.

c. Management of acute malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies

Acute malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies are associated with an increased risk of morbidity and mortality for affected individuals. Micronutrient deficiencies are difficult to identify and when known to be prevalent in the population, it may be assumed that this could be exacerbated by the disaster. These deficiencies should be tackled using

population-wide interventions and individual treatment by providing supplementary feeding.

Minimum Standards in Food Security

While meeting immediate needs and preserving productive assets will be the priority at the onset of a crisis, responses must always be planned with the longer term in mind, including an awareness of the impact of a degraded environment and its restoration.

The “general nutritional support standard 1: nutrient supply” of the Minimum Standards in Nutrition reads: “people’s nutrient needs are met”. General food rations should contain at least 2000 kilocalories of energy per person per day (more in the cold climate) as well as the minimum daily allowances of protein, fat and micronutrients recommended by the United Nations.^[12,13] The key indicators include standards in terms of intake of vitamins and other nutrient substances, absence of scurvy, pellagra or beri-beri, access to breast milk or recognized substitutes for infants under six months and overall low levels of malnutrition. The “requirement standard” for food aid reads: “the food basket and rations are designed to bridge the gap between the affected population’s requirements and their own food sources”.

The Sphere Project’s food quality and safety standards should also be mentioned. General nutritional support standard 2 of the Minimum Standards in Nutrition reads: “food that is distributed is of sufficient quality and is safely handed so as to be fit for human consumption”. The key indicators include the absence of outbreaks of food-borne diseases caused by distributed food, the absence of complaints from the recipients, the existence of appropriate quality checks, etc.

General nutritional support standard 3 states: “foods that are provided are appropriate and acceptable to the population”. The key indicators are consultation with people regarding the acceptability and appropriateness of the foods being distributed; no conflict with the religious or cultural traditions of population, the staple food distributed is familiar to the population, etc.

General nutritional support standard 4 states: “food is stored, prepared and consumed in a safe and appropriate manner, both at the household and community level”. In addition, the resource management standard for food aid includes key indicators concerning food aid storage (“storage is safe and clean”, “food commodities are inspected and unfit commodities are certified and disposed of in accordance with standard procedures”, etc.).

The disaster-affected population in need of food security should receive assistance that meets their primary needs, prevents erosion of their assets, reduces vulnerability and

promotes their dignity. Distribution of food, cash or vouchers or a combination of these is the most common initial response to acute food insecurity. Other types of response that need to be considered early are food subsidies, temporary fee waivers, employment programs, productive support to livelihoods, destocking, fodder provision and the priority to re-establish normal market arrangements. The purpose would be to promote local agricultural development, strengthen regional and local markets and enhance the longer-term food security of affected country. Various agencies should take into account what others are doing to ensure that the combined response and services provided are complementary

The environmental impact of food security

All natural and man-made disasters involve a certain degree of environmental impact, which includes but is not limited to degradation of natural resources such as forests, soil, water biodiversity in general. Environmental degradation may in turn negatively affect health and social conditions of the local population. Humanitarian operations can also have a negative impact on the environment, depending on the kind of aid that is provided, which may include forest degradation (due to the gathering of fuel wood for cooking purposes), air pollution (due to the burning of cooking fuel), waste (discarded food packaging etc.) and the introduction of pests. Thus, the responses should build the capacity of people to manage natural resources and help the environment from further degradation.

Shelter - a basic necessity during disaster

Shelter is a critical determinant for survival of the affected population in the initial stages of a disaster. It is essential to provide security, personal safety, protection from the climate and to prevent disease outbreaks. It is also important for individual human dignity and to enable affected population to recover from the impact of disaster. Eventually, the appropriate response will also be determined by the ability of the displaced population to return to the site of their original dwelling and start the recovery process.

An initial needs assessment is essential to identify the shelter and settlement needs of the affected population, vulnerabilities and capacities and availability of various opportunities to aid recovery. As the shelter, settlement and non-food item standards and actions are implemented, a vulnerability and capacity analysis should be performed as it helps to ensure that the response effort supports those who have a right to assistance in a non-discriminatory manner and who need it most. The disaster-affected population, especially vulnerable people with specific needs, along with the relevant authorities, should be involved in any such assessment temporary

planned camps can be used to accommodate affected populations who are unable or unwilling to return to the site of their original dwelling and for whom hosting by other families is not an option.

Minimum Standards in Shelter and Settlement

The “Shelter and settlement standard 1: Strategic planning” states that appropriate strategies to provide shelter contribute to the security, safety and health of the affected population.^[14] The non-displaced disaster-affected population should be assisted on the site of their original location with temporary shelter, or with resources for the repair or construction of existing houses or build new structures. Assistance could be provided in the form of provision of appropriate construction materials, tools and fixings, cash or vouchers, technical guidance and training or a combination of these. The provision of building materials and policies relating to housing construction should appropriately enable the expression of cultural identity and diversity of the population.

Displaced populations who are unable to return to their original homes may arrange shelter with host families; settle as individual households or in groups of households within existing settlements. Alternatively, they may need to be temporarily accommodated in camps or in suitable large public buildings used as collective centres or school buildings. Often, people prefer to stay with other family members or people with whom they share historical, religious or cultural, and they should be assisted to do so.

The “Shelter and settlement standard 2: Settlement planning” aims to enable the safe and secure use of accommodation and essential services by the affected population being accommodated in temporary communal settlements.^[15] This includes safe, secure and equitable access to essential services like water, sanitation, energy for cooking, communal cooking facilities, heating and lighting, healthcare, solid waste disposal, schools, places of worship, meeting points, recreational areas including child-friendly spaces and space for livestock accommodation.

The “Shelter and settlement standard 3: Covered living space” defines the adequate housing that ensures sufficient covered living space providing protection from the climate, fresh air and ensuring privacy and safety from structural hazards and disease vectors.^[16] A covered floor area in excess of 3.5 m² per person is often required, with the minimum 2 meters floor-to-ceiling height at the highest point also being a key factor. Shelter solutions should encompass a range of climatic extremes and within the house, there should be materials to screen personal and household space which would aid in the provision of adequate personal privacy.

General Shelter standard 4 "Construction" provides for use of local safe building practices, materials, expertise and capacities and also maximizes the involvement of the affected population and local livelihood opportunities.^[17] Use of local skills and resources should be maximized. It is useful to involve the affected population, local building professionals and the relevant authorities in developing the appropriate safe building practices, provision of materials, labor, technical assistance and regulatory approval for the procurement and construction administration practices.

Environmental impact is mentioned in the Shelter and settlement standard 5 and it states that shelter and the construction materials and building techniques used should minimize adverse impact on the local natural environment.^[18] Efforts should be made to retain trees and other vegetation where possible, to increase water retention, minimize soil erosion and provide shade. Such management will enable us to meet the ongoing and future needs of the disaster-affected population.

There are also minimum standards for the Non-food items and the "standard 1: Individual, general household and shelter support items" mentions that the affected population must have sufficient items to ensure their health, safety and well-being.^[19] Arrangements should be done to meet the needs using familiar, locally sourced products. There should be a plan for orderly, transparent and equitable distribution of all non-food items with plans to replenish them for the population displaced for an extended period of time.

The "standard 2: Clothing and bedding" states that the disaster-affected population should have provisions for sufficient clothing, blankets and bedding to ensure their personal comfort, dignity, health and well-being of the affected population is preserved.^[20]

The minimum standards of "Cooking and eating utensils" are mentioned in Standard 3 and the affected population should have access to culturally appropriate items for preparing and storing food.^[21] The utensils should be made of food-grade plastic or stainless steel.

The "non-food items standard 4: Stoves, fuel and lighting" states provisions for the disaster-affected population to have access to a safe, fuel-efficient stove and an accessible supply of fuel or domestic energy, or to communal cooking facilities.^[22] Each household also should have access to appropriate means of providing sustainable artificial lighting or alternatives to ensure personal safety.

"Tools and fixings" standards are laid out in standard 5 and they identify and meet the tools and fixing needs for the safe construction of shelters, carrying out essential maintenance

and provide training for use of tools and debris removal.^[23]

Last but not the least, shelter and the non-food item responses by the government and supporting agencies should support existing coping strategies and also promote self-sufficiency to those who are affected by the disaster. Where public buildings, particularly schools, have been used as temporary communal accommodation, the planned and managed safe relocation of the sheltered population should be undertaken as soon as possible to allow for normal activities to resume. Any response should minimize the long term adverse impact on the natural environment, while at the same time, maximize opportunities for the affected population to maintain or re-establish activities of daily living.

Conclusion

In the past two decades, much progress has been made among the major relief agencies in standardizing approaches while dealing with disasters and complex emergencies. Food and shelter aid decisions need to be based on the minimum standard requirements discussed in this article as well as in the Sphere Project handbook in detail. They also need to be systematically evaluated repeatedly, not only for the content, but also based on their impact and effectiveness in real life situations. These activities need the inclusion and enhanced co-operation between the local government and the various non-government agencies when such emergencies occur.

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