Commentary on "Assessing the Quality of Food Aid Deliveries"

by Stuart Clark, Canadian Foodgrains Bank, 15 December 2008

Introduction

This paper was commissioned by the World Food Program to investigate the feasibility of including nutritional quality in the quantification of donor food aid activities, particularly emergency food aid. Currently, reporting of food aid activities is based on quantity (tonnes) with various calculations to translate a wide range of food aid commodities (e.g. into 'wheat equivalents') based on their prices relative to wheat. While this is reflects the reality of spending choices which must be made, it fails to take into account the relative value of different commodity choices in their impacts on human nutrition. As the extent and severity of micronutrient deficiencies becomes more widely known, taking human nutritional requirements into account in food aid has become an urgent priority.

The WFP sponsored draft paper attempts to develop the simplest possible measurements to take into account the full range of human nutritional needs as currently understood. It assumes that the recipients are totally dependent upon the provided food aid to meet all their nutritional needs.To do so, several simplifying assumptions are made:

1. **Standardization of Human Nutritional Needs** – a standard list of nutrient needs is used although these may vary significantly for different people in different situations. Nevertheless, it is a useful starting point.
2. **Standardization of Nutritional Composition** – the analysis is based on an existing WFP tool (NutVal) which uses a single set of data for each commodity. Micronutrients in particular can vary widely within a single commodity depending on variety and production characteristics. Regrettably, zinc which is recognized as a key micronutrient, is not included in NutVal although others such as Vitamin A, iodine and Vitamin C are.
3. **Optimal Distribution of Nutrients** – it is assumed that the commodities provided by a donor are distributed optimally to the recipients (based on their standardized needs).
4. **No Other Sources of Nutrition** – it assumes that the recipients will be 100% reliant on the food aid provided. While this assumption may be more valid in certain emergency situations (e.g. IDP camps), in many cases recipients may have access to their own produce, uncultivated foods or some purchases from the market, possibly derived from selling some of their food aid.

These assumptions are obviously a considerable simplification. However, nutrition is a complex issue and these assumptions seem warranted in the attempt to provide a workable measurement of food aid quality in deliveries by donors. As is clearly admitted in the paper, it also does not take into account what happens after the food aid is delivered to a country and therefore does not assess the quality of food aid as received by a recipient.

The paper develops two measures based on the calculations of the number of person-years of specific nutrients and micronutrients provided by each commodity supplied. Given that no one food aid commodity provides all the required nutrients, various calculations are developed to aggregate all the commodities provided and to weight the number of person-years of the various nutrients provided.

Potential Uses for the Nutritional Measurements

1. **Influencing Donor Choices of Food Aid Components** – the analysis of donor provision of food aid using these measures could be used to influence the donor's choice of food aid commodities and the provision of micronutrient supplements. This would be only one element of the selection as local food preferences also play a vital role. The provision of a simple computer program which would provide an output in Number of Hypothetical Adult Requirements Met (NoHARMs) for each nutrient and micronutrient for a bilateral food aid package along with a graphical representation of the results (e.g. spider diagram) could be a useful tool to promote appropriate choices for the improvement of nutritional quality.
2. **Inclusion of Nutritional Quality in Quantifying Donor Compliance with their Food Aid Convention Commitments** – currently these commitments are specified in tonnes of food aid (wheat equivalent) and, in some cases, cash provided. The current system of reducing all commodities to a single measure, tonnes wheat equivalent, is already fairly complex and the source of criticism by those who must generate the Member States' reports. Furthermore, a significant amount of the food aid counted under the Food Aid Convention is delivered by the World Food Program where the contributions of several donors are often combined in a single food aid operation and where efforts are already made to improve nutritional quality. It is doubtful that it makes sense to further complicate the Food Aid Convention commodity commitment counting in order to improve the nutritional quality of bilateral food aid programs only. However, there remains a strong case for providing some incentives within the Convention to improve the nutritional quality of food aid.
3. **Assisting in Food Aid Program Planning** – the concepts developed in the paper may provide the basis for a useful tool for food aid programmers. If programmers are able to make some assumptions about the existing food availability including its nutritional quality, they could use a computer-based planning tool as mentioned in (1) above to select a nutritionally balanced food aid package to be used in specific situations.

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