

Commentary on “Assessing the Quality of Food Aid Deliveries”

by Iacopo Vlciani, Action Aid, December 2008

Quality versus quantity

As an aid advocate, I would like to start with an aid quantity warning in this period of economic crisis. When presenting the index, the final paper has to counter any possible side-effect on quantity stemming from this focus on food aid quality. Applying an usual refrain for official development aid, donors might be tempted to play quality versus quantity. When questioned on insufficient pledges, donors could always state that higher quality donations have the potential to generate greater impact than poor quality contributions. Moreover, generous but poor quality donors will face peer and general public pressure to reduce their contributions together with increasing their efficiency. This could be the case for the US contributions in Sudan, as they are poorer in quality than the EU one. In order to avoid any misunderstanding, the final paper might consider to include a clarification on the apparent dichotomy between food aid quality and quantity. The final presentation could also include references to the donors quantitative response. During the reading of the Ethiopia and Sudan cases the reader is left with no clarity on whether global donations were sufficient or not to meet the global needs and whether donors pledges were adequate.

Data quality

It is important to be aware that available data to assess food commodities quality could be insufficient, while partially flawing the final indexes result. The problem of data quality is evident in the Ethiopian case. In fact, section 5.2 mentions that the food composition table does not include iodine value for EC commodities. As a result, the EC scores very poorly in terms of iodine, due only to this lack of data. The analysis and the index will be enhanced by adding a section assessing the appropriateness of the currently existing primary data, suggesting whether additional efforts are needed to generate new data. A first assessment for data adequacy could be carried out for the two case studies.

Quality donations vs. quality food baskets

The NoHARM ranking for each donor in each emergency is misleading as at field level all donors donations are coordinated. Coordination is easier in two extremes case: 1) if donations are totally balanced 2) donations are totally complementary. The former case does not need donors coordination and it is rewarded by the index with the maximum scores. It also encourages donors to donate only very energetic and balanced commodities: resulting in donations of corn soy blend and iodine, only. The latter case – total complementary and specialization among donors – gets the worst scoring though at field level, it is possible to have the same results as in the first case. The index penalization of food commodities specialization is at odd with the current donors move towards harmonization and division of labour. However, the NoHARM index analysis could be slightly re-written to stress the total delivery results can be achieved also via commodity specializations.

The quality index estimates food aid energetic and nutritional value by assuming that up-front donations comply with the highest quality standards. Such a centrally-generated value could reduce pressure on donors to value their food aid quality via sampling and testing. Moreover, the value of the index could be quickly dismissed as unreliable by different data generated by donors sampling. A possible way forward to assess this risk could be to carry out a analysis comparing index results with sampled results. More importantly, the index risks channelling the message that the estimated energetic and nutritional values are actually those benefiting people in need, while its value is based on raw food at the time of donation. Due to its focus on initial quality, the index indirectly reduces pressures to tackle loss of quality during the duration transport, storage and distribution phases.

In-kind vs cash donations

This food aid quality could back-fire with another commitment to improve food aid quality by simply increasing the share of cash contributions while aiming at zeroing in-kind donations. By using the proposed index, well-ranking donors could not find any reason to increase their cash contributions. In contrast, low-ranking donors could be indirectly pushed to put disproportionate efforts in improving their in-kind donations quality in order to shield themselves from a name and shame effects rather than increasing their monetary contributions. This results is even more paradoxical taking into account that the proposed quality index mainly suffers from lack of data for food donations and limited index assumptions.

Hypothetical or real requirements met

The use of needs assessments could better describe the meeting between emergency needs and food aid requirements. As the food aid quality is estimated for specific country emergency, nutritional and energetic requirements should take into account the actual structure of the population in need rather than using the hypothetical adult values. This could prove particularly important whereby HIV/AIDS positive people or children groups are quite numerous. I am aware that this alters the index acronym from NoHARM into N-o-People-Requirements-met (NoPeRM). The Ethiopia and Sudan case presentation is too limited to donors deliveries with no reference to countries emergency needs. At least the two case studies should list the total number of people in needs but this could be more comprehensive. For instance by using international needs assessments, the report could attempt to estimate country specific energy and micronutrients requirements and then to match them with NoHARM estimates. This additional effort to include a need assessment dimension is to respond donors requests, as stated in the proposal.

It is important to balance the potential set by a new measure with the need to spread existing information. As it is stated in the paper "Proposal to develop a nutritional measure of food aid flows", food aid quality sampled assessments already exist at country level, as they are carried out by the WFP countries offices. The final presentation should emphasis the commitment to make existing information available.

List of micronutrients

To my knowledge the only efforts to assess donors food aid quality in terms of micronutrients occurred in the US, measuring only vitamin A adequacy. It is important to value whether the whole list of assessed micronutrients could be delivered as separate components, as in the US case for Vitamin A. It might interesting to also assess a list limitation to those micronutrients such as vitamin A and iron whereby a high political international commitment already exists.

Contextual limitations

It is important to acknowledge the contextual limit of the index. It can reasonably be applied only in emergency situations, where people are totally dependent on external food rations. Expanding the index to non-humanitarian emergency situations will mean to assume the total dependency from external aid for the whole population in need. In this case, the food aid quality index might indirectly encourage to ignore locally available or locally produced foods, with no attention to coping strategies while fostering dependency.

Cultural appropriateness

As for assessing nutritional balance, the current index does measure and highlight only micronutrients deficits, not surpluses despite ambition (excesses of micronutrients) set in section 4.1. More importantly it aims to promote a balanced nutrition even in front of customary diets that are chronically unbalanced. Yet, is it ethical to change by improving nutritional patterns during an emergency situation if there is no sustainability to such improvement? The index completely excludes any weighting of eating and diet habits from the commodities assessments (as acknowledged in section 6.1 of the paper), very appropriate and inappropriate donations could have the same quality score. In order to integrate a cultural dimension, the

NoHARM table could include an additional and preliminary column trying to describe cultural appropriateness, by listing food commodities already included in the traditional diet, for instance.

NoHARM calculation

In the study each commodity is associated with each nutritional and micro-nutritional value, no splitting among varieties, though the proposal reckoned the need to capture brands and varieties. The calculation of the NoHARMS average is not very useful to estimate the overall balance, as it does not highlight wide variations among elements. Moreover as for assessing the NoHARMS average, the energy value –as always equal to 100% - could be removed from the calculation of the NoHARMS average, with the newly calculated index ranging between 0-100%. As for the nutritional results for the Ethiopian and Sudan cases, these could have been some forecast as 86% of food aid is provided in cereal form, as state at page 7 in the proposal paper.