4

Anatomy of WFP Emergency Operations

This chapter dissects the complex structure of WFP emergency operations to examine the four main elements that were involved in the WFP’s shift of focus from development to relief assistance:

- the strategic redeployment of WFP staff and of decision-making from headquarters to the WFP regional bureaux and country offices in developing countries;
- the WFP’s transport and logistics expertise and experience;
- the benefits of new communications and information technology; and
- the development and strengthening of partnerships and co-operation with other major humanitarian agencies, other UN and international organizations, NGOs, and the private sector.

In reality, these four elements were implemented at the same time. They are discussed separately here to obtain a clear understanding of their importance. But for all this to happen in a consistent and cohesive way, a new policy and operational framework was required that pulled the strands together, and provided guidelines and training for WFP field staff and partners to implement them.

Towards a comprehensive policy and operational framework for WFP emergency operations

As the focus shifted from providing development assistance to emergency relief operations, the policy and operational framework to guide the WFP’s work had also to change. A series of policy and operational proposals that reflected this shift in emphasis were presented by the WFP secretariat to the executive board for approval. These proposals took into account the established policy contained in the WFP’s General Regulations (2008), the WFP Mission Statement (1994) concerning the purposes and functions of the WFP and, later, the objectives laid out in the WFP Strategic Plan (2008–11), which was extended to 2013.

The WFP secretariat also took into account the UN General Assembly resolutions that led to reform in the UN system. The governing bodies of the WFP and
of the other UN funds and programmes (UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF) were transformed into executive boards in order to ensure effective interaction between the UN General Assembly, ECOSOC, and the individual executive boards. Also, there was co-ordination of UN humanitarian assistance; and Millennium Development Goals were established, which the UN agencies, including the WFP, are committed to achieve. The policy and operational proposals were also influenced by the international principles governing the effectiveness of aid as set out in the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* (2005) and by the *ACCRA High-level Forum on Aid Effectiveness* (2008). Also, some policy formulations endeavoured to extend the frontiers of traditional food aid into food assistance programmes to fight hunger in more finely-tuned or nuanced ways.

**Definition of emergencies**

Providing emergency relief is a complex operation, both conceptually and operationally. The approved definition of what constitutes an emergency sets the appropriate general framework for what events qualify for WFP relief assistance. At the beginning of WFP operations, emergency situations qualifying for WFP assistance were defined as arising out of ‘critical food shortages or famines resulting from sudden or unexpected occurrences’ (WFP, 1964). In the light of experience, that definition was considered to be too general and was amended in 1970 to:

> urgent situations in which there is clear evidence that an event has occurred which causes human suffering or loss of livestock and which the government concerned has not the means to remedy; and it is a demonstrably abnormal event which produces dislocation in the life of a community on an exceptional scale. (WFP, 1970)

Even this expanded definition was to cause problems, and three types of emergencies were identified: sudden, natural calamities, such as earthquakes, floods and hurricanes; slower-maturing emergencies arising from food shortages caused by drought, crop failures, and pests and diseases; and conflict-induced emergencies resulting in refugees and persons displaced within their own country.

In 1986, the WFP’s governing body endorsed this definition and approved broad criteria for the release of WFP emergency resources. The basic principles for a WFP response were established as: famine was unacceptable, the poorest countries should receive priority attention, the gross national product (GNP) alone should not be the measure of a country’s capacity to respond, interventions should be rapid and not subjected to excessive bureaucratic formalities and prescriptive criteria, and assistance should be temporary (WFP, 1986c).

The definition of emergencies was changed again in 2005 to reflect the major changes that had taken place in the world in which the WFP operated since the last definition was approved in 1970 (2005d). As we saw in Chapter 3, there was a dramatic shift in the focus of WFP assistance from development to emergencies and protracted crises during the 1990s. At the same time, WFP emergency responses shifted increasingly to conflict and post-conflict situations, and to