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Emergency and Relief Operations

‘The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing’ (Edmund Burke).

‘It is incredibly difficult to do good’ (Shawcross, 2000).

This chapter focuses on WFP’s emergency and relief assistance. It traces the trends and directions in its emergency aid over more than three decades; describes the different types of emergencies that have been addressed; examines the main reasons for WFP’s increasing involvement in disaster relief; summarizes the linkages between its relief and development assistance; and draws conclusions and raises issues for future concern.

Overview

On 12 November 1968, in his address at Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, in the United States, the British scientist and author C. P. Snow made the dire prophesy that ‘many millions of people in poor countries are going to starve to death before our eyes – or, to complete the domestic picture, we shall see them doing so upon our television set’ (Snow, 1968). Snow continued:

the rapidity and completeness of human communications are constantly presenting us with the sight of famine, suffering, violent death. We turn away, inside our safe drawing-rooms. It may be that these communications themselves help to make us callous. And yet, perhaps also there is the unadmitted thought that human lives are plentiful beyond belief?

He predicted that ‘local famines will spread into a sea of hunger’ by the mid-1970s.

Famine in the developing world has been virtually, although not yet exclusively, confined to conflict situations, mainly within developing countries, where
political and logistical difficulties hamper food delivery and access. This containment of famine caused by natural factors, particularly drought, is a real achievement of the process of international negotiations of which the 1974 World Food Conference was the focal point, although the full effects of climate change and global warming have yet to be experienced (Shaw and Clay, 1998). Positive steps have, therefore, been taken. But the international community and the poor countries themselves have not responded fully to the resolutions on the international conferences that have taken place, and the world still remains precariously vulnerable to widespread food insecurity.

WFP is now the main international channel for emergency relief food. This has not always been so, as the changing focus of this chapter reveals. To the end of the 1980s, the bulk of WFP assistance went to supporting development projects, with a smaller proportion going for emergency operations. Now the reverse is the case.

WFP performs a number of vital tasks in emergencies. It provides emergency relief food aid from its regular resources. It administers the International Emergency Food Reserve (IEFR). WFP helps to co-ordinate the food aid aspects of large-scale international relief operations and makes its unique transport and logistics services and expertise available to the international community. With the co-operation of donor countries, WFP has helped to improve port, storage and inland transportation systems during relief operations, the benefits of which have remained after emergencies have passed. Services have been provided to donors for the purchase, transportation and monitoring of food commodities for their own bilateral aid programmes. And a WFP International Food Aid Information System (INTERFAIS) has been developed that provides information and data for decision-making on food aid operations throughout the world.

WFP has the largest global food aid operational network. At the beginning of the 1990s, WFP staff were located in 85 country offices serving 90 developing countries. They assist in the assessment of food aid needs, requisition food, and organize its distribution from borrowed in-country stocks. WFP-hired ships carrying food aid consignments to developing countries can be diverted to provide relief supplies quickly. And to the risk and loss of their lives, WFP staff have played a vital role in getting food through to refugees and displaced persons caught up in war zones in man-made emergencies. These tasks have been built up and consolidated over the past three decades.

**Changing focus**

**WFP emergency resources**

There was one issue that caused much debate from the inception of WFP operations. While the Programme should help in times of emergency as well as assist