

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, stock-piling 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

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