



No. 6.3 Food aid: General Food Distribution

What is a general food distribution?

General food distributions are free distributions of food to an entire affected population in response to a crisis (e.g., drought, conflict, or economic shock) that has disrupted food supply.

They aim to meet immediate food needs and protect or recover livelihoods, either by mitigating the need for affected populations to sell assets to buy food, or allowing households to spend time on their productive activities that will restore livelihoods.

If the population is cut off from their food supply or suffers high rates of malnutrition, food rations should meet basic nutritional needs (see *EFSL Rough Guides on Nutrition*).

Although often the default response to most food crises, **general food distributions can actually be inappropriate when adequate supplies of food are or can be made available in local markets.**

The priority is to address obstacles to food access (e.g., lack of purchasing power, or transport), which may not be related to overall food availability.

While they can meet immediate food and nutrition needs, general food distributions can also have fairly negative impacts, especially on local economic and long-term livelihoods recovery.

Considerations of the positive and negative impacts of this type of programming need to be carefully balanced before choosing this option.

Table 1 lists some advantages and disadvantages or challenges of general food distributions.



Fig. 1: Packages of aid relief distributed in response to flooding in Bahir, India (Credit: Ian Bray/OXFAM)

When is it appropriate to do general food distributions?

General food distributions may be an appropriate in the acute phase of an emergency, during a large-scale emergency response, or as an intervention for displaced populations.

However, various criteria must be present for the response to be appropriate and/or viable. These include:

- People are **cut off from their normal food sources** or there is insufficient local availability of staple foods, and alternative means of acquiring food would take too long to prevent hunger and malnutrition;
- Foods chosen for distribution are **culturally appropriate** (taking into account local traditions), **nutritionally adequate** and are of **good quality** (i.e., they are safe and fit for human consumption);
- Rations are able to arrive **at the time when needs are greatest**; and,
- **Local purchasing of foodstuffs is prioritised**, to minimise impacts on local markets (i.e., to avoid aid ‘flooding’ local markets, lowering prices and harming livelihoods of local producers).

Table 1: Advantages and disadvantages or challenges of performing general food distributions

Advantages	Disadvantages/challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often the most readily available resource • Low administrative management requirements • A means to ensure immediate, short-term security of food supply in affected areas • Can contribute to lowering market prices, facilitating widespread access to food • Low cost if food is provided by the World Food Programme (although distribution costs can be high) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time lag for food reaching its destination • High logistical management requirements • Food distributed not always culturally appropriate, potentially undermining people’s dignity • Undermines local markets and production if food is locally available • Can lead to dependence on World Food Programme

What procedures and resources are required for general food distributions?

Once a target population has been identified (by area, number, and so on), there are a number of procedures involved in a general food distribution (Box 1).

Two important elements of general food distributions are **household and market monitoring** during the distribution, and post-distribution **evaluation**.

Food aid as an income resource: what are the risks?

Both donors and beneficiaries have used **food aid as an economic resource** since it releases income that would otherwise be spent on food, which can support livelihood strategies and help build up assets.

However, caution is advised. **Imported food aid is likely to compete with and undermine local production and trade**. If food aid is to serve as an income resource, **it should be procured locally**, with priority given to mechanisms that support small-scale producers.

Are there any programme examples that have used general food distributions?

Oxfam has used general food distributions in its emergency response. Examples include:

- In 2005, Oxfam supported a local partner in Mozambique in a general food distribution (cereals, legumes and oils) for more than 7,000 people affected by ongoing drought. This support formed one part of an existing programme aimed at addressing ongoing food insecurity in Southern Africa, that included research and advocacy on the use of food aid as a response to food crises; and,
- Also in 2005, Oxfam implemented a food aid distribution to 15,000 households through the WFP in the Red Sea State of Sudan. This distribution was part of a wider programme, which included cash for work and other medium- and long-term interventions aimed at addressing the state's chronic food insecurity situation.

Box 1: General food distribution – a rough checklist

- ✓ Beneficiaries listed (list to be monitored)
- ✓ Quantity, quality and duration of food rations (according to needs and context) identified
- ✓ Market assessed (*See Rough Guide: Market Analysis*)
- ✓ Beneficiary cards distributed (when appropriate)
- ✓ Legality and lead agency for procurement (Oxfam or World Food Programme/other agency) established
- ✓ Accessible distribution sites identified
- ✓ Distribution plan organised
- ✓ Logistics arranged (truck rental, food storage, fuel supply, distribution officers, drivers, loaders, log tracking papers)
- ✓ Beneficiaries informed of and involved in distribution
- ✓ Safety of people and food ensured (storage, crowd control, safe access to distribution site)
- ✓ Households and markets monitored
- ✓ Post-distribution evaluation completed

Where can I find further reading and more detailed information?

Oxfam GB EFSL Rough Guides:

- 2.1 *Understanding Malnutrition*
- 2.2 *Interpreting Malnutrition*
- 2.3 *Feeding Programmes*
- 2.4 *Micronutrients in Emergencies*
- 2.5 *Nutrition Surveys*
- 2.7 *Nutrition in Programming and Policy*

World Food Programme publications (www.wfp.org):

- 2005. How to Work with the WFP: a handbook for NGOs
- 2009. *The Emergency Food Security Assessment Handbook* (Annex 5 – Main response options and information required to judge their appropriateness)

The Sphere Project 2004. *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum standards in Disaster Response* (Chapter 3): www.sphereproject.org

ODI Humanitarian Practice Network 2008. *Good Practice Review: Emergency food security interventions*. www.odihpn.org

Who can I contact for more information and guidance?

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