



UNITED NATIONS
Economic Commission for Africa

**FOOD AID IN SUPPORT OF POPULAR PARTICIPATION
SUMMARY OF WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME (WFP) STATEMENT**



**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULAR PARTICIPATION
IN THE RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN AFRICA**

12-16 February 1990
Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania

In view of the urgency and the scale of needs, only millions of small-scale community activities, co-ordinated as far as possible at local level, can change the rural scene in Africa, make the land more productive, preserve the environment, reduce rural emigration and launch sustainable development based on human beings. To undertake the necessary work, the villages need a food supplement, since their present average food ration seldom provides them with enough energy to take on additional heavy work. A temporary and well-calculated injection of food aid could therefore play an essential role in mobilizing communities and enabling them to create the necessary infrastructure.

Proposal

WFP proposes that this subject be studied by all the parties concerned so that they may be convinced of its merits and possibly draw conclusions with regard to future action.

1. The many factors that can affect popular mobilization in support of development efforts include one that has not, perhaps, been sufficiently studied: namely, people's physical ability to undertake new activities over and above their traditional occupations. This physical ability depends directly on food intake. The average diet on which an African village can more or less survive and ensure the continuity of basic activities is seldom enough to undertake additional heavy manual labour. It is however this heavy manual labour that can radically change the living conditions of a community: construction of secondary and tertiary roads, providing a water supply, clearing land, anti-erosion works, planting trees, etc. The result is a particularly regrettable vicious circle: lack of food - lack of energy to undertake these works - low production and limited outlets - lack of food, and so on.

2. There are thousands and thousands of communities in this situation in Africa, not because they have no knowledge or imagination but because, quite simply, the human energy needed to transform their land is not available. Dissatisfied with a situation that seems likely to become worse, young people tend to leave the community in the hope, often of course ill-founded, of finding elsewhere the opportunities that the village no longer offers. The shortage of food is an indirect cause of rural emigration, since it makes the future of the village seem desperately stagnant or even in decline. The vicious circle then becomes a descending spiral, since the departure of the young, who are the strongest and most enterprising members of the community, condemns the latter to reduce the area of land under cultivation, thus in turn decreasing the group's future food supplies.

3. WFP has long been aware of these facts and has tried to slow down this spiral and even break the vicious circle by trying to make communities capable of undertaking work that would help them to survive and develop steadily, without external aid. By providing a daily food ration to support work for a number of years, in the slack periods of the year, on the infrastructures indispensable for the future development of the community, WFP is offering far more than a plate of food: it is offering the people new hope, a vision, perhaps far-off but nevertheless real, of the rebirth of village life and, because of this, a motivation to remain there and to till the land of their forefathers with enthusiasm. This land, if it can offer an acceptable and worthwhile life, is always preferable to the misery of the slums.

4. There may be several successive stages in community development, but one step forward, for example, greater productivity, is often enough to break the vicious circle, simply by remobilizing energies.

In supporting community efforts, WFP does not arrive on the scene with a development plan or preconceived ideas of what this development should be. It arrives with the source of energy needed to undertake and complete the works indispensable for the survival and sustainable development of the group, as seen by the latter and considered achievable.

Some technical advice and tools are often but not always useful. What is more important in the last analysis is to ensure co-ordination between the work done here and there to avoid duplication and useless effort. If, for example, every one of the villages on the left bank of a river wants to build a bridge to cross over to the right bank where there is a main road leading to a big market, it would obviously be more rational to build one bridge at a fairly-chosen spot and to link it to all the villages on the left bank by secondary roads. From this point of view, it would be useful to bring national and local authorities into the definition of plans. Similarly, the crops to be grown in the villages with access to big markets will not be decided at random but taking into account the demand on the market which is going to become accessible, and the land capability. It will also be desirable to avoid over-production and excessive competition. Indirectly, this comes down to guiding the choice of the communities in their own interest and making available to them the information they do not always have. In this field NGOs can play a strategic and essential role of liaison and animation.

5. This rural development is therefore composed of many pieces which must dovetail closely with one another. It is obviously self-centred, since the agents will be the beneficiaries of the resulting development, but it is not disorganized because a minimum of coherence and rationality has been injected into it. Ideally, the role of the central authorities should be limited to general guidelines with a view to avoiding, as mentioned above, duplication and useless expenditure of energy.

It would, for example, be pointless to encourage a community to build a school or a dispensary if it was known that neither a teacher nor a dispenser would be available in the near future to run them. The Ministries of Education and Health should therefore be consulted.

The WFP presence should help the people not only to work but also to express their ideas. It is however, the duty of those with information to share it with the community in order to save them as much effort as possible and avoid the temptation to undertake over-ambitious or utopian works.

6. The basic objective of food aid to further popular participation in development is, above all, to give community members the physical strength to do the work that will help them to escape from the impasse in which many of them find themselves due to reasons beyond their control.

To avoid creating infrastructures that are not immediately useful, a certain order is required among activities in the light of priority needs. To see that this order is respected, WFP relies on its country officers, its associate officers and the United Nations volunteers employed by it, in consultation with all the parties concerned. Not only must

the wishes of the communities be fully taken into account, but it must be ensured that future disappointments will not totally destroy the initial impetus.

These officers will also be responsible for regular consultations with other donors active in the country, whether they be agencies in the United Nations system or bilateral organizations, NGOs, etc.

Working at local level, in direct contact with the people concerned, WFP tries to be both the promoter of their ideas and the organization providing the energy needed for the work that will form a sound basis for sustainable development. In order, however, to avoid the uncontrolled proliferation of contradictory and costly micro-works, a source of serious disillusionment later on, WFP must establish a link, through the local authorities, between the major national development policies and the efforts it is promoting in the villages. It is obvious that NGOs in the field play a role of paramount importance in helping to guide activities.

As everyone knows, the distribution of food aid for work is always a delicate matter. It must be fair and abuses must be avoided. It is perhaps worth noting that most of the problems disappear when the village community itself is responsible for storing and distributing WFP commodities. Traditional systems, with their respect for individual rights, are usually better able to make a fair distribution on the basis of work done than those resulting from ministerial directives. This "privatization" of distribution is one appreciable advantage of the approached food aid in support of popular participation, and it certainly offers the same advantages in the distribution of inputs of all types. What is more important, the community system of mutual assistance takes care of the neediest people even if they have been unable to participate physically in the work. Thus, by slightly rounding up the number of rations envisaged, or being a little more generous with regard to work norms, a social dimension is added to food aid, which can never be under-estimated in a village where everything is shared.

7. After its long practical experience in the field of popular participation in development (see Annex), WFP would like, in conclusion, to submit the following remarks for the attention of participants at the Conference:

When famine rages in Africa, the world mobilizes itself to the utmost to provide relief for the victims; WFP consider itself a leading force in the mobilization, as everyone knows.

When there are no famine victims to be listed, the general public tends to lose interest.

But, half-way between those who are dying of starvation and those who have enough to eat, there are in Africa millions of rural people who never really have enough food to enable them to participate fully in the enormous work of African development from which such great progress is expected.

There is much talk of popular mobilization and micro-works to be undertaken: attempts are made to privatize development as far as possible; long lists of works are drawn up to change the life of the continent, with continuous emphasis on the benefits of rural development with a human face. But can it seriously be thought that the people who are today underfed or badly fed have the necessary physical energy to change the countryside? Is there not a contradiction here? As we all know, natural conditions in

Africa weigh heavily on human beings. Africans need all their courage and all their energy to exploit their continent's potential.

Can it really be hoped that in these conditions men and women on a frugal diet will be able to take up the challenge and change their environment with their bare hands?

For WFP, the answer is clear enough: in the present situation only heavy machinery can deal with the most urgent of the major works (which usually increases the debt). The rest of them are already more or less suspended, or likely to be so. About 500 calories will have to be added to the average daily diet of rural Africans over a period of years if they are to be able to do the work needed to protect their environment and develop their land. Later if the population stabilizes, the rural resources of the continent may well be sufficiently mobilized to embark on a sustainable and self-reliant development system.

Since it is obviously impossible to add immediately 500 calories a day to the diet of all badly-fed but potentially mobilizable rural people to help them contribute to the development of their land,¹ it would be useful to study, first, the justification for the hypothesis throughout the continent and, secondly, if it proves to be even partly true, how to organize the work and the necessary food supplies.

As of now, we are convinced that a vast field of action is open to all - governments, bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental organizations - to work together for the sustainable development of African rural areas with, as their principal partners, the poorest inhabitants of these areas, sufficiently well-fed to participate actively in the enterprise.

¹ For a minimum of 100 million particularly needy rural people, this would mean the injection of about 5.5 million tons of cereals a year.

WFP approved and operational projects in support of self-help community development ²

Country project	Cost of community development activities (\$US '000)
Benin (2096)	7 268
Burkina Faso (3376)	4 775
Central African Republic (2652)	5 287
Congo (3587)	802
The Gambia (2739)	7 413
Kenya (2669)	2 386
Kenya (3935)	457
Lesotho (3853)	537
Mauritania (2822)	8 373
Sierra Leone (2663)	1 673
Togo (402)	921
Total (rounded)	40 000

In above listed projects in 10 African countries WFP contributes a total of \$US 40 million towards community development.

In addition, many other approved or operational projects have significant self-help elements which can be roughly assessed to amount to at least another \$US 40 million.

² Including only those projects with relatively easily quantifiable community development activities.