Emergency food assistance standard

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Key points

- WFP is UNHCR's biggest partner in ensuring refugee food needs are met. When refugee populations are larger than 5,000, UNHCR and WFP collaborate to meet their food and nutrition needs. UNHCR meets the food and other basic needs of populations smaller than 5,000.

- When designing food assistance, cash assistance should always be considered as an option, in accordance with UNHCR's cash policy and guidance and the basic needs approach. Cash assistance programmes should be designed in collaboration with other actors, in line with the Four Principles Statement and UNHCR/WFP's Cash Addendum.

- When UNHCR provides in-kind food assistance, the NutVal calculator should be used to calculate the nutritional value of rations.

- Food assistance should target those in most need, in support of UNHCR's protection and solutions strategy for refugees, and refugee self-reliance.

- When UNHCR and WFP provide basic assistance, and collaborate to target assistance, share data, make systems inter-operable, or agree joint programming in food security and nutrition, these programmes should be integrated in Operations' Joint Plans of Action.

- The Sphere Handbook should be used as a reference when designing food assistance.

1. Overview

This entry provides information on minimum standards to ensure that basic food needs are met in emergencies and protracted situations. It should be read and implemented with standards on other basic needs (see UNHCR, Basic Needs Approach), standards on the use of cash and vouchers, and standards on nutrition.

These standards set out actions and indicators to ensure that populations of concern receive
high quality food and remain safe. For additional guidance refer to the Sphere project, Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response (2018).

2. Main guidance

Emergency standard

Food security exists when all people have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences, enabling them to live an active and healthy life. In a humanitarian crisis, food security responses should aim to meet the short-term needs of affected populations and make it unnecessary for them to adopt potentially damaging coping strategies. Over time, responses should protect and restore livelihoods, stabilize or create employment opportunities, and contribute to restoring longer-term food security. They should not have a negative impact on natural resources and the environment.

Household food insecurity is one of four underlying causes of undernutrition, along with poor feeding practices, poor care practices, an unhealthy household environment, and inadequate healthcare. Responses to treat malnutrition will have a limited impact if the food needs of the general population are not met. People who recover from malnutrition but who cannot maintain an adequate food intake will deteriorate again.

To choose the most effective and efficient options, an emergency response must identify and understand the needs of refugees, household preferences, effective and cost-efficient solutions, protection risks, the situation of host communities, and seasonal factors. It should define clearly the type and quantity of food assistance (in-kind or cash) required, who should receive food assistance, and how food assistance should be distributed.

Assessing the food security and nutrition situation

A response should be based on an objective assessment of the state of nutrition and food security. UNHCR's Standardized Expanded Nutrition Survey contains modules on nutrition and food security that provide standardized questionnaires and analysis plans. Wherever possible, these should be adapted to fit the circumstances, agreed with partners, and used to assess the situation.

Many food security assessments are done by WFP in collaboration with UNHCR. Joint Assessment Missions (JAMs) should be run when an emergency starts and every two years during a protracted operation. Operations should use JAM analyses to guide the development of Joint Plans of Action.

Food security response: food assistance

A range of interventions can promote household food security. They include cash assistance and the provision of in-kind food. When refugees have access to goods and markets, cash is often the most appropriate form of assistance and UNHCR should promote cash as part of the initial emergency response where it is appropriate, in line with UNHCR's Policy on Cash-based Interventions. Adequate cash grants can enable people to meet their basic needs, including food.
UNHCR's Cash feasibility and response analysis toolkit should be used to determine when cash grants are appropriate and how they should be issued. UNHCR has committed to work collaboratively with WFP, UNICEF, OCHA and other partners to target and monitor cash grants, develop transfer mechanisms, and approve financial services. See the Four Principles statement on Cash Collaboration (2018) as well as UNHCR and WFP, Cash Addendum (2017), which outlines UNHCR's commitments on cash collaboration.

Food security responses (including food in kind and cash) should be designed from the outset to support, and work through, local markets. Decisions on local, national and regional procurement should be based on a sound understanding of local markets and financial service providers. For more information, see UNHCR, Cash feasibility and response analysis toolkit (2017), and UNHCR, Multi-sector Market Assessment: Companion Guide and Toolkit (2017).

Food security response: key actions (Sphere, 2018)

- Based on food security assessment data, design a response to meet immediate needs, and consider measures to support, protect, promote and restore food security.
- Consider both in-kind and cash-based options for the food basket.
- Develop transition and exit strategies for all food security programmes as early as possible.
- Integrate food security programmes with the responses of other sectors.
- Ensure that people receiving assistance have access to the knowledge, skills and services they need to support their livelihoods and cope.
- Protect, preserve and restore the natural environment from further degradation.
- Consider the impact of cooking fuel on the environment.
- Promote livelihood strategies that do not contribute to deforestation or soil erosion.
- Monitor the degree to which different groups and individuals accept and have access to humanitarian food security interventions.
- Ensure that people who receive food assistance are consulted on the design of the response and that they are treated with respect and dignity.
- Establish a mechanism for providing feedback.

UNHCR and WFP collaboration

WFP is a long-standing partner of UNHCR and UNHCR's populations of concern. The 2011 Global Memorandum of Understanding between UNHCR and WFP guides cooperation between the two agencies. To assess needs and develop a Joint Plan of Action at country level, the two organizations conduct Joint Assessment Missions (JAMs) at the start of an emergency and at two year intervals thereafter. For guidance on how to conduct a JAM, see Joint Assessment Missions: A Practical Guide to Planning and Implementation.

Where populations of concern are larger than 5,000 individuals, WFP is responsible for ensuring their food needs are met. UNHCR meets the basic needs, including food needs, of smaller populations.

UNHCR's collaboration with WFP has broadened over time, as both agencies and the contexts in which we work have changed. We have renewed our commitment to collaborate on cash assistance, data sharing, and targeting assistance to those in need. UNHCR has agreed to work with WFP as a partner in designing food and cash responses, with the aim of helping refugees to
be self-reliant in food security and nutrition. A Joint Plan of Action guides each operation. The following documents provide information on specific areas of collaboration that should feature in Joint Plans of Action:

- UNHCR and WFP, Cash Addendum (2017).
- Principles for Targeting Assistance to Meet Basic Food and Other Needs (2018).
- Data Sharing Addendum (2018).
- Joint UNHCR/WFP Strategy on Self-Reliance in food security and nutrition (2016).

**In-kind food assistance**

Food assistance is required when the quality and quantity of available food or access to food is not sufficient to prevent excessive mortality, morbidity or malnutrition. In-kind food assistance should be designed to meet the immediate food and nutrition needs of the population of concern while preserving and protecting assets and increasing resilience to future threats.

A wide range of tools can be used in food assistance programmes. They include:

- General food distributions (provision of food in-kind and cash assistance for food purchase).
- Blanket supplementary feeding programmes.
- Targeted supplementary feeding programmes.
- Provision of relevant services and inputs, including transfer of skills or knowledge.

General food distributions assist those who need food most. Food distributions should cease when those who receive them can produce or obtain their food by other legal means.

People who need specific nutrients may require supplementary food in addition to general rations. Those likely to need supplements include children aged 6–59 months, older people, persons with disabilities, people living with HIV, and pregnant and breastfeeding women. Supplementary programmes should comply with UNHCR's Operational Guidance on the use of specialised Nutritional Products to reduce micronutrient deficiencies and malnutrition in refugee populations, with UNHCR’s Global Public Health Strategy, and with the Sphere standards for management of acute malnutrition, micronutrient deficiency diseases, and infant and young child feeding.

On-site feeding is undertaken only when people do not have the means to cook for themselves. It can be necessary immediately after a crisis, during population movements, or where insecurity would put recipients of take-home rations at risk.

An effective food assistance programme requires strong supply chain management, logistical capacities, and management of commodities. Management of cash delivery systems must be robust and accountable, with systematic monitoring. (See the Entry on Cash based interventions.)

**Nutrition requirements for general food assistance**

Individuals must have adequate access to a range of foods, including fats, proteins, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals, that together meet their nutritional requirements. The minimum nutrient requirements for an individual are given in the table below and should be used to design and assess general rations. The table should not be used to assess the adequacy of
supplementary or therapeutic care rations, or rations for specific groups (such as persons suffering from tuberculosis or living with HIV).

These minimum requirements list the **average** nutritional needs of all age groups and both sexes. They do not describe the **specific** needs of particular age or sex groups and should not be used to set the requirements of individuals.

General rations should be adjusted (up or down) based on:

- The demographic structure of the population, in particular the percentage of those under five years, and the percentage of females, older people, and adolescents.
- Mean adult weights, and actual, usual or desirable body weights.
- The rate of activity required to maintain productive life. Nutrition requirements will rise if activity levels are more than 'light' (1.6 x basal metabolic rate).
- Average ambient temperature, and shelter and clothing capacities. Requirements will rise if the mean ambient temperature is lower than 20°C.
- The nutritional and health status of the population. Requirements will rise if the population is malnourished or needs more nourishment to catch up on growth. The prevalence of HIV may affect the population's requirements.

**Planning general food rations**

To ensure that nutrition needs are met, an online nutrition calculator, [www.nutval.net](http://www.nutval.net), should be used to plan general food rations. When commodities and amounts are entered into the app., it calculates the nutritional composition of the ration. In addition, ask whether you need to add:

- Iodised salt for the majority of households (>90 per cent).
- Additional sources of niacin (e.g. pulses, nuts, dried fish) if the staple is maize or sorghum.
- Additional sources of thiamine (e.g. pulses, nuts, eggs) if the staple is polished rice.
- Additional sources of riboflavin, where people depend on a very limited diet.

**Note.** Donated or subsidized infant formula, powdered milk, liquid milk or liquid milk products should not be distributed as a separate commodity in a general food distribution. These items should also not be distributed in a take home supplementary feeding programme.

**Key actions when designing food rations** (from Sphere, 2018)

- Select foods that comply with the national standards of the host government and/or internationally accepted standards of quality.
- Choose appropriate food packaging and provide labels that show the date of production, country of origin, expiration or 'best before' date, nutritional analysis, and cooking instructions. Make sure this information is labelled clearly and in a local language, especially when the food in question is unfamiliar or is not commonly used.
- Evaluate the refugee population’s access to water, fuel, stoves and food storage facilities.
- Provide access to adequate milling and processing facilities when wholegrain cereal is provided.
- Meet the milling costs of recipients using cash or vouchers. Alternatively, provide additional grain or milling equipment (these options are less desirable).
Transport and store food in appropriate conditions.
Measure quantities in consistent units. Avoid changing units or measuring procedures during the project.

**Key actions for food targeting, distribution and delivery** (from Sphere, 2018)

- In line with the UNHCR and WFP's Joint Targeting Principles, food and other basic assistance should be targeted at those in need, based on joint analysis.
- Targeting should be clearly communicated. It should be accepted by both recipient and non-recipient populations in order to avoid creating tensions and doing harm.
- Establish food distribution methods, or cash/voucher delivery mechanisms, that are efficient, equitable, secure, safe, accessible and effective.
- Consult women and men, including adolescents and youth, when you design food delivery systems. Encourage the participation of groups that may be vulnerable or marginalized.
- Make sure that distribution and delivery points are located in places that are accessible, safe, and convenient for recipients.
- Minimize the risks to recipients when they travel to distribution points. Regularly monitor checkpoints and changes in the security situation.
- Provide recipients with advance details of the distribution plan and schedule, the quality and quantity of the food ration or the value of the cash grant or voucher, and what needs the distribution covers.

**UNHCR guidance on food donations**

- All nutritional products must be approved at global level by WHO and UNICEF as ‘safe to treat or prevent a condition’.
- In general, minimum donations for persons of concern to UNHCR must be sufficient to provide the item to all households; or, if for use by a section of population, must be sufficient to provide a three month supply.
- Acceptance or use of any special nutrition product or food must take into consideration its potential interaction with other products in use, to avoid toxicity.
- UNHCR will not accept any of the following items:
  - Products containing milk or milk products without evidence that they have been approved at global level by WHO.
  - Products that are not compatible with local cultural or religious norms.
  - Products whose expiry date falls less than one year from the date of shipment.
  - Products that do not have a clear contents label and a certificate showing that they are safe to consume.
  - Products targeted at infants or young children, including but not limited to breast milk substitutes or milk powders.
  - Non-fortified salt, oil or flour.

- All food donations should be accompanied by a cash contribution to cover the inland transport, storage and distribution costs of the donated commodity.
UNHCR only distributes foods that meet food safety standards in both donor and recipient countries. Foods must be deemed safe for human consumption. Donations must adhere to the guidelines of the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

Annexes

WFP-UNHCR, Global Memorandum of Understanding, January 2011

UNHCR-WFP, Joint Assessment Mission (JAM) Guidance

UNHCR Essential Medicines and Medical Supplies Policy and Guidance 2013

UNHCR, Policy related to the acceptance, distribution and use of milk products in refugee settings

The Sphere Handbook

3. Links


4. Main contacts

Contact the Public Health Section, Division of Programme Support and Management (DPSM), UNHCR. At: hqphn@unhcr.org.