

# Emergency food assistance standard

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## Key points

- WFP is UNHCR's main 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 Principals 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

The emergency food assistance standard 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 Handbook, Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response \(2018\)](#).

## 2. Relevance for emergency operations

The emergency food assistance standard outlines minimum standards to meet basic food needs of forcibly displaced people during emergencies and protracted situations. When people are displaced, their access to food may be severely disrupted. By implementing these standards, humanitarian operations can ensure that affected populations receive adequate nutrition, which is essential for their survival and well-being. The standard emphasizes coordination among various stakeholders, including UNHCR and other basic needs providers. By aligning food assistance with other essential services (such as health, water, and sanitation), a comprehensive response can be delivered. In addition, the standards set out specific actions and indicators to ensure that food provided meets high-quality standards. This includes factors like nutritional content, hygiene, and safe handling. By adhering to these guidelines, organizations can prevent foodborne illnesses and malnutrition, promoting the health and safety of affected populations.

## 3. 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, insufficient water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities and practices, 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](#) (SENS) 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.

The joint analytical framework (JAF) is a set of **tools to guide UNHCR and WFP country operations** to reach a **common understanding** of the ability of refugees, asylum seekers, and other forcibly displaced people **to meet their basic needs**. The JAF **guides joint assessments and analysis** to inform programmatic interventions (i.e. food, non-food, multi-purpose cash) to meet basic needs and includes a dedicated add-on module to inform joint livelihoods and self-reliance programming. The JAF should be used **collaboratively** by UNHCR and WFP in contexts where both agencies are jointly involved in providing basic needs assistance to refugees and other forcibly displaced people, or when UNHCR and WFP want to design joint livelihoods interventions to support economic inclusion and need a common framework of indicators.

### **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 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's Cash feasibility and response analysis toolkit](#) (2017), and [UNHCR, Multi-sector Market Assessment: Companion Guide and Toolkit \(2017\)](#). 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 response: key actions (The Sphere Handbook, 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](#). More recently, UNHCR and WFP have jointly developed the Joint Assessment Framework (JAF) to inform targeting, prioritization, assessment, and analysis.

Pursuant to the [2011 Global Memorandum of Understanding](#), 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 \(2018\)](#).
- [Data Sharing Agreement \(2020\)](#).
- [Joint UNHCR/WFP Strategy on Self-Reliance in food security and nutrition \(2016\)](#).

The UNHCR-WFP Joint Programme Excellence and Targeting Hub ([Joint Hub](#))

Established in April 2020, the Joint Hub is comprised of an inter-agency team of roving UNHCR and WFP contracted technical experts. The Joint Hub is a demand-driven service drawing on each agency's expertise, knowledge, and networks. The Joint Hub responds to requests from UNHCR and WFP country operations and regional bureaux, offering strategic and technical support backed by data and evidence throughout joint planning and programming. This includes assessment, evidence-based decision-making, targeting, prioritization, measures to enhance accountability to affected populations and the development of sustainable solutions to enhance self-reliance and inclusion in national development plans and investments.

#### Key Considerations 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 to avoid creating tensions and causing 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 designing 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:
  - o Products containing milk or milk products without evidence that they have been approved at global level by WHO.
  - o Products that are not compatible with local cultural or religious norms.
  - o Products with expiry date that fall less than one year from the date of shipment.
  - o Products that do not have a clear contents label and a certificate showing that they are safe to consume.
  - o Products targeted at infants or young children, including but not limited to breast milk substitutes or milk powders.

o 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.

### **Integrating long-term solutions into emergency responses**

Emergency food assistance should be a component of a larger approach in line with the [Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus](#) and the [Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion emergency assistance](#) guidelines when displacement begins to ensure durable solutions.

### **Global Network Against Food Crises**

Meticulous data on assessments and distributions should be maintained to contribute to forums such as the [Global Network Against Food Crises](#) to give an essential reference document to that food security and nutrition analysts, policymakers, decision-makers, and advocates.

### **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.
- Consider employing targeting and prioritization methods using established assessment tools as the situation warrants.

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.

## **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 2,100 calories with approximately 50-60 percent carbohydrates, 15-20 percent protein and 30 percent fats, as well as meeting micronutrient requirements. In areas with rising rates of overweight and obesity, WFP food baskets should limit the quantity of salt (3 g per day), sugar (20-30 g) and oil provided. These considerations extend to other foods which may be high in salt, sugar and/or oil such as ground nuts and fruits, which are healthy in moderation. More information on specific nutritional programmes can be found in the [designing nutrition programmes in emergencies guidelines](#).

## **Annexes**

[WFP-UNHCR, Global Memorandum of Understanding, January 2011](#)

[UNHCR-WFP, Joint Assessment Mission \(JAM\) Guidance](#)

[UNHCR, Policy related to the acceptance, distribution and use of milk products in refugee settings](#)

## **4. Links**

[UNHCR, Standardized Expanded Nutrition Survey](#) [The Sphere Handbook, Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response \(2018\)](#) [Four Principles statement on Cash Collaboration \(2018\)](#) [Principles for Targeting Assistance to Meet Basic Food and Other Needs \(2018\)](#) [UNHCR and WFP, Cash Addendum Data Sharing Addendum \(2018\)](#) [Data Sharing Agreement \(2020\)](#) [Joint UNHCR/WFP Strategy on Self-Reliance in food security and nutrition \(2016\)](#) [Operational Guidance on the use of specialised Nutritional Products to reduce m...](#) [Codex Alimentarius Commission](#) [UNHCR, Public Health Strategy 2014-2018](#) [NutVal](#) [UNHCR, Basic Needs Approach](#) [Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus Joint Hub](#) [Livelihoods and Economic Inclusion emergency assistance](#) [Designing nutrition programmes in emergencies](#)

## **5. Main contacts**

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