Commodity distribution (NFIs, food)

29 March 2023

Key points

- Assess the needs of those who are affected and identify and assess their coping mechanisms.
- Based on sourcing plan to identify which commodities can be purchased locally and which need to be procured abroad.
- Ensure that persons of concern receive sufficient guidance and information about what items will be distributed, when and how, and their purpose and use.
- Do not plan a distribution without coordinating with other actors that are involved in similar commodity distributions.
- Do not make distributions at the last minute; planning them requires time.
- Do not conduct a distribution if the security of staff and persons of concern has not been assessed.

1. Overview

In an emergency situation, families often flee with little more than the clothes they are wearing and consequently find themselves displaced without any personal belongings. In addition to food, they urgently need certain non-food items to survive, including items for shelter (tents, plastic sheeting, blankets, sleeping mats), cooking (stoves, pots, fuel), and health and sanitation (buckets, soap, jerry cans, sanitary cloths, mosquito nets).

In emergencies, various actors may distribute non-food items (NFIs), making it difficult to organize distribution in a manner that is fair and ensures that all needs are met. This Entry describes how to set up, organize and implement the distribution of NFIs and food items.
2. Main guidance

Protection objectives

To provide commodities necessary for life to displaced populations in a coordinated, fair and organized manner, while strengthening their coping mechanisms, and taking account of their specific needs, cultural values, the environment, and physical context.

Underlying principles and standards

Sphere Standards:
a. The affected population has sufficient individual, general household, and shelter support items to ensure their health, dignity, safety and well-being.
b. It has sufficient clothing, blankets and bedding to ensure their personal comfort, dignity, health and well-being.
c. It has access to culturally appropriate items for preparing and storing food, and for cooking, eating and drinking.
d. It has access to a safe, fuel-efficient stove and an accessible supply of fuel or domestic energy, or to communal cooking facilities. Each household also has access to appropriate means of providing sustainable artificial lighting to ensure personal safety.
e. When responsible for the construction or maintenance of shelter or debris removal, it has access to the necessary tools, fixings and complementary training.

Other standards:

○ All refugees (male and female, children, older persons) are consulted and participate in the design of distribution systems.
○ No assumptions are imposed with respect to the family size, structure, or needs of refugees.
○ Persons who are at risk or who have special needs are prioritized and monitored.
○ All refugees benefit equally and fairly from commodity distribution according to their needs.
○ Refugees receive detailed information about the content of distributions, and when and how distributions are made.
○ Women participate on equal terms in distributions and their management.
○ Distributions of commodities are coordinated with the wider humanitarian community.
○ The security of both refugees and humanitarian workers who run distributions are assessed and taken into account.
○ At the start of crises, distributions take place quickly, to save lives and prevent distress.
○ Commodities are distributed in a manner that promotes self-reliance, livelihoods and durable solutions.
Protection Risks

Commodity distributions may cause, or be associated with, several risks.

- Insufficient quantities of non-food items (NFIs) or food commodities may be available to cover all refugees' needs at a given point in time.
- NFIs may not be used or may be misused.
- Distributions may undermine rather than reinforce coping mechanisms.
- Distributions may increase tensions between refugees and host communities.
- Inappropriate selection and distribution of commodities may cause health problems.
- Distribution centres may be located in areas that are insecure or have natural hazards.

Other risks

- If the population is highly mobile, it may be hard to provide full coverage and avoid duplication.
- Because commodity distribution involves all sectors, it is difficult to coordinate.
- Items may be sold commercially.
- Distributions can be delayed, if logistical, administrative and security problems are not clearly and promptly identified.

Key steps

1. Establish a coordination mechanism

When establishing a coordination mechanism, consider whether you are dealing with

- A refugee crisis.
- An IDP crisis.
- A mixed situation.

For additional guidance, please see the Entries on coordination.

2. Situation analysis

To understand the context and contribute to preparedness and operational planning, distribution focal point(s) should participate in situation analyses and should notably collaborate with registration and protection colleagues and with the information manager to:

- Establish baseline population figures and specific needs by location.
- Collect 3W information (Who's doing What, Where?).
- Set up an information/database tracking system.
- Track NFIs and food items in MSRP (receipt and issuance by warehouse location).
- Complete a secondary data (desk) review. This should consider past experience, information on local culture, studies of the crisis (origins, context, nature), and data on
displacement. The review should identify information gaps and priorities.

Situational analyses should also include information on:

○ The capacity of local Government and NGOs to provide and distribute non-food items (NFI).
○ Women’s cultural practices with respect to hygiene and sanitary needs.
○ Cooking practices; sources of fuel.
○ Specific clothing or NFI that are traditionally used by the population or that will be required because of impending seasonal weather changes.
○ NFI coping mechanisms within the refugee community.
○ Situation-specific issues that may affect NFI planning or distribution.

3. Select commodities

Needs assessment
As commodities are used across all sectors, needs assessments should be joint and multi-sectoral.

○ Identify immediate life-saving NFI/food distribution activities and priorities, including for persons with specific needs.
○ Identify potential future problems related to NFIs and food items. Do projections and make contingency plans.
○ Identify refugees who are self-supporting (who can meet their NFI needs from their own resources).

Some items may be distributed without conducting a needs assessment, based only on a review of secondary data. Some goods may also be distributed while an assessment is being finalized.

Market survey

○ Conduct a market survey (to determine the availability of local materials, and the potential to develop alternative NFI solutions).

Joint commodity selection and planning with partners

○ When selecting commodities for distribution, ensure an age, gender and diversity approach is used to establish the needs.
○ Assess the quality of each item and the quantities required.
○ Determine which commodities can be purchased locally and which need to be procured abroad.
○ Decide on priority items and agree a timetable for their distribution and replenishment.
○ Identify and develop a common information campaign to inform persons of concern.

4. Preparations before distribution

Registration.
Ideally, compile a registration list of all targeted households. It should indicate the ration card /
token (depending on system, see also emergency registration) number, family's size, name of the head of household, the number of members who are male and female, their age (0-5, 5-11, 12-17, 18-59 and above 60), and their specific needs.

If registration has not been carried out, identify community leaders and invite them to act as focal points during registration. Do a random check of the lists they prepare to ensure the information is accurate and that age, gender and diversity are considered.

If registration is not feasible, work with community leaders to identify individuals who should be prioritized for distributions, as well as individuals and families who have not yet been assisted.

**Record keeping.**
During distribution, record who has been assisted and what they have received. One practical technique is to punch refugees' ration cards (if these have been issued). Where these are available, new technologies (mobile devices, bar coded vouchers) can also be used. Regardless of methodology, make sure that all the organizations involved in distribution use similar and compatible recording methods.

**Distribution system options**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of distribution</th>
<th>1. Distribution to large groups through representatives</th>
<th>2. Distribution to families or small groups, through the heads of groups of families</th>
<th>3. Distribution to individual heads of families</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commodity distribution</td>
<td>Commodities are given in bulk to a representative of a large group of targeted population.</td>
<td>All the commodities for a group of families are given to a representative of the group or to representatives or heads of each household. Groups are relatively small (no more than 20 families).</td>
<td>Commodities are given to each family head.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Situation for which the method is appropriate</strong></td>
<td>During the very early phase of an emergency, when registration has not been conducted and mass influxes involve large populations, or when insecurity limits access.</td>
<td>When the situation is stable and a list of the targeted population is available.</td>
<td>When the situation is stable and registration has been conducted.</td>
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| **Strengths** | ● Quick and easy in the early phase of an emergency.  
● Low cost.  
● No registration data is needed. | ● Lower risk of abuse compared to the first method.  
● Increases community participation.  
● Logistically easier for the distributing agencies | ● More control over the number of refugees assisted.  
● Easier to monitor.  
● Easier to ensure equitable distribution.  
● Some groups at risk may be identified.  
● Direct contact with heads of households. |
| **Weaknesses** | ● Risk of abuse if social structures are broken or inequitable.  
● Focuses responsibility on leaders, and **age, gender and diversity** aspects may not receive attention. | ● A list of beneficiaries is needed.  
● Tension can occur between group members and their traditional leaders.  
● Lack of individual contact with all households. | ● Expensive and resource intensive.  
● Little participation by targeted population. |
**Prerequisites for successful use**

- Good understanding of the social and cultural dynamics.
- Spot checks and monitoring to ensure that distribution is equitable.
- A strong information system.
- An effective complaint mechanism.
- Heads of groups must be chosen by refugees.
- Spot checks and monitoring to ensure that distribution is equitable.
- A strong information system.
- Effective complaint mechanism(s).
- Registration and entitlement cards.
- Effective complaint mechanism(s).

**Selecting distribution centres**

A range of factors will determine the location and number of distribution centres. They include the number of refugees and the number at each site, their locations and the distance between each location, and the availability and location of resources (warehousing and means of transport).

Ideally, one distribution site should handle no more than 20,000 persons. In non-camp settings, the site should not be more than 4 hours' walk (10 km) of where refugees live. In camp settings, recipients should not wait for longer than 4 hours to receive assistance.

Distribution centres must be identified and planned, and a distribution flow designed. A centre should have one entry, a waiting area, a reception area, a distribution area, and an exit.

If it is not possible to locate the centre within walking distance, arrangements should be made to transport refugees to and from the centre.

Ensure that distribution centres have enough latrines and water sources, for the distribution team as well as refugees.

To minimize disruption of distributions, do not locate centres in crowded places, such as markets, hospitals, or schools.

**Planning, frequency and scheduling**

A distribution plan needs to consider refugees' interests, security and logistical constraints, the form and frequency of distributions, the number of individuals who will receive distributions, and the resources available.

If stocks are sufficient, consider distributing to all refugees at once over the course of a day. This minimizes the cost and effort for the distributing agency. It is also a more convenient arrangement for refugees in urban areas or in rural dispersed settings who have far to travel.
Delays or shortfalls in procurement should nevertheless not delay the start of distribution. You can adopt a phased approach, which meets the most urgent needs and prioritizes groups at high risk. A second round of distributions can then follow.

A distribution schedule must be designed carefully. It should include a clear schedule of working hours and set a realistic distribution target (in terms of the number of people served per day). The schedule should be shared with logistic focal points (warehouses and transport) to ensure that commodities can be prepared and delivered as planned.

**Information campaigns**

Information campaigns are vital: it is crucial to inform refugees before distribution about what will be distributed, how and when, to whom.

Make use of a range of channels, including community leaders and an information board; be imaginative, take account of the context, and aim to reach 100% of those who require assistance.

During an information campaign, you will need to indicate clearly:

- Distribution is free of charge.
- How refugees can report any abuses by the staff who manage distributions.
- Who will receive the commodities that are to be distributed, and selection criteria (if relevant).
- What items refugees are entitled to receive (quality and quantity).
- When distributions will occur (date and time).
- The location of distribution centres and the areas (populations) that each will cover.
- How distributions will be organized and how those who receive distributions should behave.
- The purpose and use of the items distributed (to avoid misuse or undesired effects).
- When future distributions are planned, and their frequency, so that refugees can plan ahead.

### 5. Distribution

Arrive at the distribution centre early enough to organize its layout and the staff. Begin with crowd control, and provide information to refugees who have already gathered at the site.

Crowd control is a key element in any distribution. Do not start a distribution until crowd control measures are in place. Ensure that monitoring arrangements are in place.

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<th>When beneficiary lists are available</th>
<th>When no lists are available</th>
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Refugees listed to receive distributions, and those with specific needs, are called into thereception area. In the reception area, they are verified against the distribution list or (if appropriate) their ration card number. After verification, they enter the distribution area. They receive the items to which they are entitled and sign for them. (Signature, thumb impression, mobile or biometric record, voucher or barcoded card). Ideally, they also receive a receipt; if ration or entitlement cards have been issued, this can be punched.

Households or individuals who cannot be verified against the list should be directed to the litigation desk for a decision and counselling. Do not take decisions in the reception area because it can delay or obstruct distribution.

Distribution without lists is not recommended, but may be considered in the early phases of an emergency, or if registration is not available, for immediate emergency relief assistance.

If locations of targeted population are known, giving recipients a token before distribution will reduce the risk of duplication.

If exact locations are unknown or the population is dispersed, rely on the community structure to reach people.

Sound scheduling and effective information campaigns are essential to make centres accessible and control crowds at distribution centres.

Consider using many distribution sites and restricting distributions at each site to 1 or 2 days; use of invisible ink can help to avoid recycling.

Consider handing out tokens and collecting information on households (name of head of household and family size). This can (i) be the basis for household and individual registration and create a list for accountability purposes; (ii) establish a list for follow-up distributions; and (iii) strengthen accountability to donors.

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6. After distribution

Monitor to ensure that the items distributed are used for the purposes intended. You can monitor by means of random visits to households, interviews with key informants, and focus group discussions.

Identify any items whose purpose and use needs to be explained in more detail. Consider whether such items are necessary and whether it is appropriate to distribute them.

Monitor items that are being sold commercially or in exchange for other items: resale may indicate unmet needs or that other unidentified needs have a high priority.

Share a distribution report with members of the coordinating mechanism, to ensure that distribution arrangements are consistent.

Key management considerations

Commodity distribution is likely to involve a variety of organizations in several sectors. A coordination structure should be established, and the organizations involved should meet regularly. Updates on coverage, gaps and needs should be shared regularly. The frequency
of meetings will depend on the situation: participants are likely to meet often at the start of an emergency and less often as the situation normalizes.

- Coordination forums may be decentralized. Where it will increase effectiveness, national coordination bodies should delegate coordination to local focal points. Suitable focal points may be found among the partners involved in commodity distributions.
- Distribution reports should be shared with members of the coordinating mechanism, to ensure that distribution arrangements are consistent.
- The roles and responsibilities of the different partners involved in commodity distribution should be defined clearly. The content and frequency of reports, and reporting standards, should also be defined and agreed.
- For food distribution more specifically, a tripartite agreement between UNHCR, WFP and distribution partners will need to be formalized at country level. The respective roles and responsibilities of UNHCR and WFP in relation to food aid are set out in a global Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between both agencies.
- Monitoring and spot checks should take place after all commodity distributions to ensure that distribution is efficient and equitable.
- Managers should adopt an AGD approach. The role of women in commodity distribution should be acknowledged, and women beneficiaries should participate meaningfully in the management. All refugees should enjoy equal and representative participation, in a manner that reflects the population's economic, cultural and social diversity.
- In most emergencies, UNHCR will be addressing conflict-induced displacement: it is important to protect the security of both staff and refugees in accordance with UN security standards.

Resources and partnerships

In most UNHCR operations, a programme officer, supported by a logistics officer, organizes distribution of commodities.

Target populations are a key resource. Community leaders should be involved (provided they are available and accepted by different groups in the refugee community). It is important to ensure that women are represented adequately.

Key roles for commodity distribution include:

- One team coordinator for each site, who has responsibility for overall coordination of distributions at the site, and who reports to the programme officer on a daily basis.
- One distributor for each kit or commodity item that is distributed.
- Enough staff to unload materials received from the warehouse.
- Enough trained staff to provide crowd control and prevent fraud. This role may be performed by local authorities.
- Where possible, include staff with a protection profile to identify and monitor the distribution process, paying particular (but not exclusive) attention to refugees with specific needs.
- Invite volunteers from the community to help carry the commodities of those who have specific needs (children, those with disabilities, the old, infirm, sick, injured, etc.).
Staff at litigation desks need to be trained to assist targeted population who have questions regarding their entitlements, or who have specific needs. It is important to address queries and concerns as they arise and to do so fairly, both to avoid discrimination and disruption to distributions. Install a complaints box at the distribution centre, so that refugees can report instances of fraud.

In the interests of effectiveness and safety, prepare a checklist that sets out the equipment required for each role. It should be verified at the start of each day. Equipment might include, for example: paper, pen, whistle, microphone, puncher, ink, radio, etc.

**Annexes**

- Camp Management Toolkit, Chapter 13, Food Distribution and Non-Food Items
- IASC, Gender handbook
- MSF, Non Food Items Distribution, Version 1.0, 2009

**3. Links**

- UNHCR, Guidance on contributions of medicines, medical supplies and food items
- UNHCR's policy related to the acceptance, distribution and use of milk products
- UNHCR-WFP Joint Assessment Mission (JAM) guidelines and technical guidance sheets
- UNHCR-WFP Global Memorandum of Understanding 2011
- SPHERE Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response
- UNHCR Public Health Strategy 2014-2018
- NutVal
- UNHCR, Emergency Information Management Toolkit, Minimum Sectoral Data, Core Re...