Book Review Article

Forty Years of Multilateral Food Aid: Responding to Changing Realities

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The World Food Programme (WFP) now has a high-profile position amongst UN agencies. It plays a key role in the international response to conflict-related humanitarian crises and their aftermath. All too often there are large numbers of affected people who need relief, because they are displaced or struggling to rehabilitate their lives. Recently there have been the crises in Kosovo, East Timor and the internationalised conflict in Afghanistan following 11 September 2001. WFP is recognised as a key player and, I noted when preparing this review, it is commonly referred to in the media as ‘the UN relief agency’.

This contemporary prominence contrasts with its modest beginnings in the early 1960s as an experimental joint programme of the United Nations in New York and the Food and Agriculture Organization. Despite the many inevitable problems in delivering relief in today’s circumstances, the WFP is widely seen to do this effectively and efficiently, and this would be sufficient reason for considering it as one of the success stories of the UN system.

But, as Shaw explains in his Preface to this book, this visible, unambiguous role in organising and delivering relief assistance contrasts with how little is known ‘outside a small circle of those immediately involved’ about the development work of WFP. This work he describes as aiming to reach and benefit ‘abjectly poor people in the world’s poorest countries with their two greatest needs – food and work’. What he is referring to is the major part of WFP’s original and extremely restricted mandate as a provider of project food aid. This food is directly distributed to beneficiaries, usually through government development and social welfare projects in developing countries. The food is typically provided in two ways. One, commonly known as ‘food-for-work’, is as wages in kind for work on an agricultural, natural resource or labour-intensive infrastructure project. The second is as an income transfer or nutritional supplement through a mother and child health or school-related food distribution or feeding project.

Other kinds of project support have been limited. Dairy development projects that were largely resourced from European Community surpluses in the 1970s and 1980s

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supplied milk powder and butter oil, which was sold to the local dairy industry and the funds earmarked for dairy sector development, especially to benefit small and marginal farming households. There have also been a few food security projects supporting the establishment and operation of grain reserves. None of these things are ‘accidental’ but, as Shaw explains in this extremely useful in-depth historical account, are a consequence of the way the organisation was established and has evolved within the constraints placed on it by member governments, especially the food aid donors and the US in particular.

The book covers the antecedents to WFP, describing in considerable detail its creation and formative early experience between 1963 and 1965, and then devotes a meticulously documented chapter to food aid for development, emergencies and food resources. It provides the first detailed account of the emergence of WFP as a separate agency and ends with a chapter covering the recent period of Catherine Bertini as Executive Director and attempts at reform and renewal.

Shaw’s book is timely for two reasons. Firstly, there are uncertainties surrounding the future of the UN, and there is a near consensus on the need for reform. This account makes clear the difficulties of such an undertaking. Changes were necessary in WFP because it had outgrown the original arrangements, perhaps appropriate for a programme subordinate to two masters in New York and Rome, and had in effect become a separate agency. As a well-informed insider, Shaw documents the enormously difficult process by which the former Executive Director, James Ingram, with the support of most member states, reconstructed its governance and organisational arrangements between the mid-1980s and early 1990s, despite the obstruction of the former Director-General of FAO, Eduard Saouma.

Secondly, the volume also provides an important case history of the consequences of US unilateralism in foreign, agricultural and development assistance policy. The US was the prime mover behind the establishment of WFP. It is extremely unlikely that a UN food aid agency would have emerged without US willingness to support such an initiative. But the US also saw it as an additional multilateral channel for the constructive use (and of course disposal) of its food surpluses. The WFP would complement existing US food aid programmes by concentrating on providing food that would in theory represent additional consumption by beneficiaries and, by implication, not disrupt local markets or other US exports. It would not provide programme food aid for sale. Nor was it expected to play a significant role in emergency aid, which is intrinsically political, and in practice often difficult to separate from programme aid. In the early 1960s the US, which had been the major provider of development and reconstruction aid since the Marshall Plan in 1947, was also looking for burden-sharing by Europe and Japan and a multilateral programme was a vehicle for achieving this.

The future of international food aid, that is, aid provided in the form of commodities or finance restricted to the acquisition and delivery of food, is again under discussion in the post-Seattle negotiations of the World Trade Organization. As the past history of WFP reminds us, achieving a better regime that addresses the needs of poorer, less food-secure people will require more than good intentions. Not only the interests of member governments but also the mandates, establishments and budgets of agencies that are in question are factors to be taken into account in achieving a better regime. As Shaw suggests, an understanding of how WFP came about, how it evolved
into a major UN agency and what he would see as the limitations on its role, contributes
to that debate.

Those researching international affairs and development co-operation will find this
book interesting, because it is an insider’s account of the process through which a major
institution evolved. But that is also what makes the book frustrating, as being an
introspective, ultimately incomplete history. Perhaps Shaw felt constrained in his
account by the confidentiality imposed upon UN staff. Some important issues are noted,
but insufficiently explored; for example, the unusual position of the US in insisting
from the outset on having a veto on all WFP projects (pp. 64-5). Shaw acknowledges,
but does not discuss, how major economic and political events have impinged upon and
shaped WFP through crises and donor pressures. Instead, he presents a picture of an
apparently quasi-autonomous world in which the ‘Key Events’ of WFP’s history are
reports, meetings and resolutions set out in the four-and-a-half page chronology at the
beginning of the book.

The account of how the WFP has become, in terms of both resources and external
perceptions, primarily an emergency and relief agency is too brief, only one chapter. It
is factually accurate, whilst failing to provide a sense of why this happened. The early,
largely US, opposition to WFP playing a major role in emergencies is recounted. Then
the unforeseen shape of events such as major droughts, floods and conflicts and the
emergence of a broader donor community trying to co-ordinate its response
progressively gave WFP what amounted to a new role and status. It was drawn into an
increasingly important role in the international response to the drought crises of the

Insufficient importance is attached to the mass exodus from Cambodia and
Afghanistan in 1979-80, arguably the first of the conflict-related humanitarian crises
that led the international community to make WFP responsible for what became large-
scale protracted relief operations. The significance of these events is indicated by WFP
commitments for emergency operations – amounting to US$209 million in the 13 years
from 1963 to 1975, and then rising to a record US$191 million in 1980 alone. This was
achieved using the International Emergency Food Reserve as the vehicle for relief aid.
For the first time, the international community fulfilled the IEFR annual target of
500,000 tonnes of commodities, but not as the unrestricted pledges envisaged by those
who drafted the arrangement in 1975 as a response to the 1973-4 world food crisis.
Instead, most of this multilateral aid was specifically designated by the bilateral donors
for these two operations – what came to be known as ‘multi-bi’ aid. Shaw criticises but
does not explore this phenomenon of donors increasingly designating and tying their
contributions for disaster relief, favouring some emergencies over others (p. 183).

Globalisation becomes part of the narrative only in the final chapter with the
conclusion of the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations. The WFP was established in an
era when international trade in agricultural commodities was mainly administered by
public agencies. The governments of most developing countries and their parastatal
agencies were also heavily engaged in managing internal food systems. The provision
of development food aid has largely involved supplying food to government
programmes through these agencies. In a changing economic environment, the current
liberalisation of internal markets and the shrinking role of government raise questions
about the practicality and appropriateness of WFP supplying food aid for direct
distribution, except in emergency situations and for relief.
This issue is highlighted by WFP policy on monetisation (pp. 198-202), that is, selling food aid in the recipient country and using the local currency proceeds to support development project activities. Shaw notes the reluctance of the governing body to allow WFP to monetise on a large scale, but does not explore the motives of donors for blocking this option. He also refers to WFP experience that monetisation is not an easy option. However, in contrast to WFP, US private voluntary organisations (PVOs) or NGOs have successfully lobbied Congress to allow them to monetise an ever-increasing proportion of the project food aid allocated to them by the US government and have enthusiastically exploited this opportunity (see Cekan et al., 1996).

There are situations apart from emergencies where the direct provision of food may be the most appropriate form of assistance – as rations, as supplementary feeding, as meals in schools, even as interventions in incomplete, poorly functioning markets. However, what is less clear is whether the supply of international food aid – much of it tied to specific sources and commodities – is an effective and efficient way for the international community to support these efforts in poor countries. The argument is then advanced by Shaw and other supporters of food aid that it is to some extent additional and commands more support in donor countries than other aid.

This has always been the view of former Senator George McGovern to whom Shaw gives pride of place in Chapter 2 of his narrative as more than 40 years ago doing the most to establish WFP. It was ‘one man’s inspiration’, a proposal that reflected a philosophy of ‘support for the American farmer; the constructive use of food surpluses; and the resolving of international problems through the medium of the United Nations’.

The nature of the continuing debate about development food aid is exemplified by the McGovern ‘food for education’ initiative in 2000, after this book had been drafted. This initiative repackaged old ideas, envisaging the use of temporary, and so unassured, surpluses held by the US Department of Agriculture to provide the resources for school feeding and food for poor families with schoolchildren in poor countries. Shaw has carefully documented WFP’s mixed experience with school feeding and the declining share of resources committed to it, because of ‘the extensive evaluative literature that had shown that the promise of such programmes was difficult to achieve in the reality of many developing countries’ (p. 102).

The US Congress has accepted and formalised, and WFP has embraced, the McGovern initiative. In WFP offices around the world one finds leaflets setting out the potential benefits of food for education. But have the circumstances changed? Are governments and educational institutions better able to overcome the obstacles to achieving these benefits for poor children and their families? What is the ‘demand’ for food aid? There are many hungry schoolchildren and families that cannot afford to send their children to school. But do these same educational institutions want to devote scarce human and other resources to organising school meals around an uncertain and inflexible resource, imported food aid? If they could choose, might they have other priorities? If feeding were a priority, might they prefer funding for locally supplied food?

Shaw’s meticulously researched and documented volume is an important contribution to the institutional history of the UN. As the former Senior Economist, who worked in the organisation for thirty years, he is also a protagonist, still strongly committed to the original conception of WFP as primarily a development agency. The arguments of those who question the effectiveness of WFP’s support for development
are acknowledged, but variously characterised as ‘antagonists’ and ‘other views’.
Perhaps Shaw gives too much weight to the findings and conclusions of heavily
negotiated official evaluations and insufficient weight to those of independent
researchers and policy analysts. He makes a thought-provoking case for the
continuation of large-scale development food aid. However, he fails to address
adequately the implications for food security policy of globalisation, liberalisation of
internal markets and donors’ resource uncertainty as demonstrated by their actions
during the 1990s. What was a good idea in 1960 and a pragmatic compromise in 1981,
seems increasingly obsolete in 2002.

Reference

Institute.
Food aid may take the form of a loan, a sale below market price or a current transfer. Food aid programmes across the globe are generally designed to provide short-term assistance to countries. However, many countries have developed a dependence on food aid assistance.

The paper estimates cross-sectional regressions using a database containing 116 developing countries over the period 1970-2003. Book reviewed in this article: D. John Shaw, The UN World Food Programme and the Development of Food Aid.

Aid donors face growing demands to explain and justify the allocation choice between multilateral and bilateral aid channels. Among other reasons, this is because the aid disbursements of multilateral agencies looks, in many cases, quite similar to the disbursements of bilateral donors, offering aid on similar terms, within the same countries and to the same sectors (Annen and Knack, 2015). This is primarily due to multi-bi aid destabilising the performance, credibility and governance of multilateral institutions. The paper concludes that there are critical opportunities for donors to be more reflective in the comparative allocation of aid to bilateral and multilateral conduits.