

Humanitarian Food Assistance and Nutrition Outcomes Among Refugees: A Historical Perspective

Abstract

Objectives: This paper seeks to understand the following specific objectives; to explore the evolution of humanitarian food assistance or food aid; to gain an understanding of the contemporary views on humanitarian food assistance; to explore the comparative views on humanitarian food assistance and implications of shifting from Food Aid to Food Assistance, and to know the implications of shifting from Food Aid to Food Assistance.

Study Design/method: Secondary data collection method was used and both published and official documents were reviewed based on the objectives of this paper, and relevant information was picked. The review provides evidence on the benefits as well as gaps related to humanitarian food assistance interventions and its relationship with nutrition status of children below the age of five years.

Results: Food in-kind directly impacts positively on the nutrition status of households and influences the coping mechanisms of the affected populations. In Mali, a study found food transfers exert a protective effect on food insecure populations in conflict situations and increased micro-nutrient availability. Another study found improvement in nutrition status among children in Myanmar, Kenya, Niger, and South Sudan. While global acute malnutrition (GAM) in Myanmar declined from 6.6% to 2.6% and from 7.5% to 4.7%, in Niger, GAM rates declined from 21.3% to 13.6%, and 11.4% to 7.3% in Kenya and in South Sudan, a decline of 6% GAM. Also, a study on the *“impact of cash transfers on food consumption in humanitarian settings found* cash transfer is an appropriate and effective modality in humanitarian setting for meeting needs of vulnerable populations.

Conclusion: The strategic shift from food aid to food assistance has the potential to enhance effectiveness in addressing hunger because there is an increased use of non-food aid in operational modalities and other initiatives to enhance local production and purchase, and the use of vouchers and cash transfers in humanitarian response.

Keywords: Humanitarian Assistance; Nutrition Status.

1.0. Introduction

This paper discusses the effects of humanitarian food assistance on the nutrition status of refugee children aged 0-5 years from the historical perspective based on the available literature. The paper reviews secondary data on humanitarian food assistance and nutrition status among refugee children. Humanitarian interventions are done after a significant disruption of people's daily life which in turn affect their food security and nutrition needs (Bounie et al., 2020). Conflicts, political instability and other disasters compromise people's ability to manage their day-to-day livelihoods, and these worsen their food and nutritional vulnerability (Bounie et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2018). Food assistance has become a key element of humanitarian aid to conflict-affected populations, intended to promote the survival and growth of infants and young children

(Gelli & Tranchant, 2018; Mozaffarian et al., 2018). Throughout human history, humanitarian food aid was provided in the form of food or non-food items for people affected by famine, drought, or natural disaster (Mourey, 2014; Rysaback, 2015; Webb et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2018). Hunger and undernutrition can significantly worsen during situations of prolonged conflicts and where institutional capacities are weak (Bounie et al., 2020). Malnutrition in children is related to poor food quality, insufficient food intake, and severe or repeated infectious diseases (WHO, 1997). Since World War II, the humanitarian aid is meant to feed, shelter, and provide legal protection to people affected by conflicts (Barber, 1997a). Traditionally humanitarian assistance has been provided during emergency period in the form of in-kind goods and services (Bounie et al., 2020). However, a report of Rondel & German, (2000), revealed that the proportion of food aid has significantly declined over time due to the shift in relief food from the traditional recipients in Africa and Asia to new recipients in Europe, arising from the economic crisis. This shift has made cost of food commodity procurement much cheaper and accessible.

2.0. Background to humanitarian food assistance and nutrition outcomes

After World War II, food aid became part of US government foreign policy (Fix et al., 2017). Food aid has evolved continuously since 1950s when US Public Law PL480 was enacted to initiate Food Aid Program and Farm Bill (Schlossman, 2016). With rapid rise in the numbers of refugees in the late 1970s, levels of emergency food aid supplied to refugees increased dramatically during the 1980s due to protracted nature of the operations (Nicholds, 1992). A study by Hoddinott et al., (2020) on the relationship between food transfers, electronic food vouchers, and child nutritional status in Bangladesh among the Rohingya refugees found that children 6 to 23 months from households that received an e-voucher instead of food ration had improved growth, and 36 percent of children were stunted in households receiving the food ration as compared to 27 percent receiving the e-voucher. This implies that food assistance influences nutrition status differently. Similarly in Niger, Hoddinott et al., (2014) found households with food baskets had positive impacts on food consumption and diet quality than those on cash transfers, and coping strategies were less with households on food and less than 5 percent of food received was sold or exchanged for other goods. Food in-kind directly impacts positively on the nutrition status of the households and that food assistance influences the coping mechanisms of the affected populations. In Mali, a study on the "*impact of food assistance on food insecure populations during the conflict*" by Tranchant et al., (2019), found food transfers exert a protective effect on food insecure populations in conflict situations, and that food assistance increased micro-nutrient availability for households. Another review on the "*impact of cash transfers on nutrition in emergency and transitional contexts*" by Bailey & Hedlund, (2012) found improvement in nutrition status among children in Myanmar, Kenya, Niger, and South Sudan. The study found global acute malnutrition (GAM) in Myanmar declined from 6.6% to 2.6% and from 7.5% to 4.7%, in Niger, GAM rates declined from 21.3% to 13.6%, and 11.4% to 7.3% in Kenya while in South Sudan, a decline of 6% GAM was reported after unconditional cash transfers were provided. This implies that both food in-kind and cash transfers improve dietary intake and impact on the nutrition status of the households differently. Evidence from a study by Bailey, (2013) on the "*impact of cash transfers on food consumption in humanitarian settings: A review of the evidence*" revealed that cash transfer is an appropriate and effective modality in humanitarian setting for meeting needs of vulnerable populations and that there was an increase in calorie consumption by households however, it did not lead to improvements in dietary diversity

compared to food aid. Similarly another comparative study by Karuhanga, (2018), on nutritional outcomes among children aged 6-59 months in households receiving cash and households receiving dry food rations in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in Western Uganda, found the prevalence of stunting in children from households on cash was 46.7% and 49.4% in those receiving food, the prevalence of underweight children was 19.6% for those receiving cash and 25.3% for those on food, and the prevalence of wasting was 2.1% for beneficiaries of cash and 3.5% for beneficiaries of food in-kind. Overall, the prevalence of stunting, underweight and wasting were high in households that received food in-kind than those on unconditional cash transfer programme (WHO, 1997). This implies cash transfer intervention is better option of humanitarian assistance.

3.0. Problem statement

Humanitarian food assistance is given to ensure sufficient, safe, and nutritious food are consumed to prevent malnutrition and prevent death (UNHCR, 2017b; European Commission, 2013). Food aid is used to address global nutrition goals (Caiafa et al., 2019), and WFP food aid delivery is guided by its core strategies of saving lives of refugees and other conflicted affected populations, improving nutrition and quality of life of the most vulnerable people at critical times in their lives (8) The majority of refugees in Uganda depend on food assistance provided by WFP to meet their daily food needs, and without sustained assistance, refugees may face acute food insecurity (USAID, 2019). Out of 1.36 million refugees in Uganda as of June 2018, about 1.1 million were receiving food assistance either in-kind or through cash transfers, however, 18% of refugee households have low food consumption score and 67% have insufficient access to food in 7 days for all members of the household (UNHCR, 2019b). Although food assistance is the largest part of humanitarian assistance, food aid levels and rations have declined significantly and refugee children are at high risk for nutritional and health disparities (UNICEF, 2019; WHO, 1997). Overall, in Uganda, malnutrition is widespread across refugee settlements with wasting and stunting as high as 8 percent and 20 percent respectively (GoU, 2011). Poor food quality, insufficient intake of nutrients such as calories, protein, or micronutrients, and severe or repeated diseases result in malnutrition in children (GoU, 2011; Iffat Iddris, 2020; UNICEF., 2019; WHO, 1997, 2015c). Similarly, poor diets, unfamiliarity with available foods, and socioeconomic influences contribute to nutritional problems among children (USAID, 2019). Although Uganda boasts of her most favorable and progressive model, the refugee population according to UNHCR is in dire need of humanitarian assistance (Ahimbisibwe, 2019; D. Legason & Dricile, 2018a; WFP, 2019). Despite the support by the humanitarian partners, malnutrition cases continue to be rampant among the refugees, and yet funding for refugees is dwindling, leaving many refugees surviving on basic ration provided by World Food Programme (WFP), which many refugees say is inadequate in quantities and quality.

Global Acute Malnutrition (GAM) prevalence in prevalence in children ranged from 4% to 12% among refugees and 5% to 11% in the hosting population in Uganda (Lazzerini et al., 2020), and the GAM rate for children in settlement areas in Uganda is high, at 7.3 percent, with some of the highest rates found in the West Nile (UNHCR, 2018c). The burden of malnutrition among refugee children as compared to the children in host communities is high (Lazzerini et al., 2020). Refugees mainly depend on food rations that are insufficient in quantity and variety. It is on this premise that this paper tries to gain understanding of the historical perspective of humanitarian Food Assistance and nutrition status among refugee children under five years.

4.0. Objectives

This paper seeks to; (1) explore the evolution of humanitarian food assistance or food aid, (2) gain an understanding of the contemporary views on humanitarian food assistance, (3) explore the comparative views on humanitarian food assistance and Implications of shifting from Food Aid to Food Assistance, and (4) know the implications of shifting from Food Aid to Food Assistance.

5.0. Evolution of humanitarian food assistance or food aid

Before the nineteenth century, from around the 1750s to the 1790s, the humanitarian response was based on religious belief and was in response to famine, drought, and other natural disasters rather than war (Anderson et al., 2018b). The concept of humanitarianism started as charity giving mainly by the Catholics, Protestants, and Muslims in the early humanitarian movements to support those affected by disasters (Anderson et al., 2018b). The humanitarian movement today according to Anderson et al., (2018), began in the nineteenth century and the major humanitarian aid responses during this period intended to preserve British power were; (1) Humanitarian aid response to the Indian famines of 1837 and 1866, and (2) Aid response to the Irish famine of 1845 to 1849 (Anderson et al., 2018b). These were meant to retain and consolidate power by the British Government. In 1862, the experience of armed battle in the Italian city of Solferino titled “A Memory of Solferino” (Dunant 1959)”, was presented in Geneva by a young Swiss businessman called Henry Dunant, resulting in the establishment of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1863 and later, of the broader Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 1877 (Anderson et al., 2018b; Çelik, 2015; Labbé J, 2012). This paved way for the establishment of foundations or non-governmental organizations to provide relief aid to populations affected by conflicts or disasters. Around 1914, after World Wars II, the United Nations (UN) was established to provide humanitarian work until today and this shifted attention to humanitarian crises in developing countries, a proliferation of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and a growing emphasis on the humanitarian response to civil wars, internally displaced persons and complex humanitarian emergencies in the world (Anderson et al., 2018b). After the establishment of these organizations, the humanitarian response became well-coordinated and prepared to respond to the global crisis. Humanitarian aid now is responding to needs in conflict or natural disaster situations, supporting displaced populations in acute and protracted crises, risk reduction and preparedness, early recovery, livelihoods support, conflict resolution, and peace-building globally (Davey et al., 2013). Many relief organizations have played a key role in offering relief assistance to avert hunger and deaths in Africa.

6.0. Contemporary views on humanitarian food assistance

Although humanitarian assistance has evolved in recent years (Doocy et al., 2011), Humanitarian assistance has shifted from just focusing on emergency relief, protection, and shelter to refugee self-reliance and integration through income-generating activities, cash transfers, and market strengthening (MacPherson & Sterck, 2021). Food assistance activities promote the safety, dignity, and integrity of the people receiving assistance while integrating the protection needs of beneficiaries (WFP, 2010). However, nearly all humanitarian assistance, 94%, has been provided in-kind until recently when there is a shift to cash or vouchers because of the belief that there is less cost in delivering cash or vouchers and cash offers to the beneficiaries (Hoddinott et al., 2020). While in-kind and cash transfers have advantages and challenges, they both influence food

security outcomes (GAO, 2016; World Bank Group, 2016). Food in-kind is still effective and acceptable assistance to the refugees because it is readily available to avert hunger and malnutrition. The provision of cash assistance requires a paradigm shift (Doocy et al., 2011). Food aid has grown beyond the practice of shipping excess raw commodities to delivering food products and other services including cash transfer (Caiafa et al., 2019). Cash Transfer Programme (CTP) is a new growing humanitarian assistance modality that has the potential to provide beneficiaries with choice, strengthen local markets, engage the private sector, and empower people and communities (The World Bank Group, 2016; WHO Western Pacific Region, 2018). Most countries and donors are moving away from giving commodity-based assistance, such as food aid, to alternative transfer modalities such as cash and vouchers for conflicted affected populations (Hidrobo et al., 2012). Cash transfer is the most effective tool for improving several aspects of food security including access, availability, stability, and utilization (FAO, 2012). For example, in Uganda, cash transfers increased children's consumption of starches, dairy (by 66%), meat (by 100%), and eggs; whereas food had no impact on the frequency of consumption of any of the food groups (Bailey, 2013). Regardless of the type and scale of the conflict or disaster, affected populations require urgent and timely food assistance.

7.0. Comparative views on humanitarian food assistance and nutrition outcomes

Although power has often influenced humanitarian assistance, Curtis, (2001), noted that the politicization of humanitarian aid is the 'pursuit of domestic and foreign policies of donor governments by humanitarian means. Food is a fundamental right that is also protected under many international, regional, and local frameworks (Puglia, 2019). The Food Aid Convention (FAC), was forged more than 40 years ago between 23 donor countries to use grain surpluses, however, over time, food aid practices in some member states and some donors' policies have changed to include cash transfers within broader definitions of food assistance, basically from food aid to food assistance (Von Oppeln-Bronikowski, 2011). For example, the majority of the refugees depend on the general food rations given by WFP because they have limited freedom and access to livelihood opportunities (14,15). Other than monthly food rations, non-food items, and multi-sectoral services provided, refugees are allocated land for housing and farming, which are small (UNHCR, 2018b). The persistence of hunger for large numbers of people justifies the WFP transition from food aid to food assistance in response to a changing context, particularly in post-crisis/non-emergency situations cash (Jantzi & Ressler, 2012). The shift from food aid to food assistance is also to allow for the inclusion of cash within the scope of food assistance (16). Increasing conflicts amidst limited funding for emergency programs, has limited humanitarian responses, making the shift to food assistance necessary because food assistance encompasses a range of assistance from giving food in-kind, and cash transfer, to a voucher system. Given the nature of humanitarian crises around world and massive displacements of populations, the humanitarian actors need to adopt a more flexible and acceptable intervention approach to meet the needs of the displaced persons.

8.0. Implications of shifting from humanitarian food Aid to humanitarian food assistance

Food assistance programs and policies according to Lentz & Barrett, (2013), have been rapidly changing to include a range of services from direct food, cash, or voucher transfers, to food subsidies to increase access to the quality and quantity of food consumed and hence improve beneficiaries' health and nutritional status. Hunger and undernutrition can significantly worsen during situations of prolonged conflicts especially where institutional capacities are weak to

provide the needed services for the people (Bounie et al., 2020). Providing conflicted affected populations with sufficient quantities of safe foods necessary for healthy and sustainable diets at the right time is challenging in some situations (Bounie et al., 2020). Conflict and political instability are major drivers of undernutrition although the use of cash, as opposed to in-kind delivery, has enhanced dietary diversity (Tranchant et al., 2019; WFP, 2015, 2021). The roll-out of cash transfers to refugees has widened the ability to access varieties of food, even when the markets are not fully developed to provide various foodstuff. The shift from food assistance has increased flexibility and given beneficiaries the option to choose the type of assistance they want to benefit from.

9.0. Conclusion

The strategic shift from food aid to food assistance has the potential to enhance effectiveness in addressing hunger because there is an increased use of non-food aid in operational modalities and other initiatives to enhance local production and purchase, and the use of vouchers and cash transfers in humanitarian response. Populations affected by conflicts and disasters need food assistance to avert hunger and deaths. Communities caught up in conflicts situations, usually lack access to adequate food, shelter, water, and protection services. Therefore, food assistance becomes a priority intervention and a requirement for humanitarian response.

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