

Food Security

Not by *Bread* alone

Can NGOs working in food aid deliver development programmes based on food security? Irene and Steve Evison suggest that they can – but only if they follow some basic principles.

Food aid relates to a relief situation, food security is concerned with the long-term. The response required by aid organisations in each case are markedly different, but how do you move from a position of working to provide immediate food aid to one of being a catalyst of long-term food security?

Some of the answers can be drawn from the experiences of an international NGO working in southwest Tanzania. Within the district, people live and work within a subsistence economy; seasonal food shortages for some families are the norm. The local government is difficult – soils are poor, rainfall is low, water supply limited, communications are poor, with no buses, and no major markets.

Some years ago, the staple food crop-cassava – failed, following widespread attack by the pest, cassava mealy bug. On government instruction, villages had no choice but to uproot their entire crops as the only certain way to eradicate the pest.

At the request of Regional Government, an international NGO provided transport and distribution support to bring maize into the affected villages, as temporary replacement for their lost staple food supply. The NGO supplemented their input with a limited number of nutrition and horticultural seminars, combined with a small distribution of vegetable seeds.

Right place, right time

Grain distribution could only be a short-term solution to an immediate problem. The issue of seasonal food shortages still remained. Following gradual re-planting of cassava, the local communities could expect to return to their subsistence existence. Even in the best of situations it would take years to return to the acreage previously planted. In the meantime, people suffered greater than average seasonal shortages. In addition, the failure of their staple food supply had highlighted the precariousness of their circumstances.

From the perspective of the local government and communities, the international NGOs involvement in food aid distribution represented an opportunity for assistance with the development of long-term food security and the more general economic development in the area.

But can a food aid organisation help with the promotion of food security? In this case, the NGO conducted its own feasibility study in the area to determine whether its capabilities and expertise could meet the needs of the villagers. On this basis, the NGO committed itself to a year of research (leading to a proposal to international funders for longer-term funding), followed by active involvement in development activities for a further five years. The situation would then be evaluated, but organisation anticipated it would remain active in the area for at least 10 years.

Groundwork

The research period is crucial in making decisions about how an ‘outside’ organisation can work with local people in creating a long-term solution to a food security problem. It is fundamental to acquire an in-depth knowledge of the area. There are several reasons for this.

By gathering information, project workers will build relationships with villagers and local government, helping to form the necessary level of mutual trust for working in partnership over a number of years.

Research also helps to reach an understanding of each of the myriad factors that affect the level of food security for individuals and the community as a whole; factors such as soils and climate, health, traditional customs, water supply, the wider national economy and communications.

An understanding of the area's history shows how past events can influence the contemporary area. In the case of southwest Tanzania, the physical location of the villages in the 1990s was largely a result of the 1970s 'villageisation' process.

This had had a number of knock-on effects. Family homes and kitchen gardens were in more concentrated communities, putting more pressure on local natural resources than in the original extended community area. Social customs which protected community health had been lost. A new feeling of dependence on government support – where previously there had been little or no expectation – had grown up.

The NGO experienced both advantages and disadvantages in switching from food aid to food security.

On the upside, the organisation already had some knowledge of the area's environment, communities, people and problems. Its long-term involvement in the area was based on a local government request for assistance (having made the link through food aid), rather than top-down or 'outsider' decision-making.

On the downside, some villagers assumed that because they had already been 'given' aid, the same principles held for the longer-term development work. In other words, project workers faced a type of dependency towards the organisation.

In addition, some form of precedent had been set in terms of which villages had been assisted. In the event, the long-term project boundaries were set to coincide with local government divisional boundaries, which therefore included 11 villages in the project area.

Participatory approach

The organisation worked on a participatory basis to research and plan its activities in the villages. One useful tool was to give certain reasons very quickly. These might be lack of water or planting material. But finding a viable long-term solution depended on delving deeper into these quick answers, carrying on asking the question, 'Why'?

Lack of water could be a problem for many reasons: the gravity feed system through the valley did not work; the local spring had dried up; there were no year-round water supplies near the home; the water was dirty. Each of these reasons had to be discussed even further.

For example, why did the gravity feed piped water system not work? Investigation revealed that the system suffered from fundamental poor design – water never could reach the furthest point intended. Discussions with local government officials explained why there had been no maintenance 0 there were no funds available to pay workers or buy replacement parts.

Conversations with villagers showed how access to the pipe was limited.

Although the pipe might pass through the village centre, perhaps only 5% of the population actually lived near enough to it to be able to reasonably carry water from it back to the home. Even if they did, not all taps were communally available, as a few influential individuals had paid to obtain private taps.

All of this information was vital in understanding the issues that could make any investment in the existing system, or in an entirely new system, a success or a failure.

Obviously, this approach to discovering root causes to particular problems is time-consuming, but it is a fundamental way to learn from past mistakes, as well as to build up an adequate level of understanding on which to base decisions.

Conclusion

It is evident that working towards food security involves a completely different set of attitudes, techniques and time-scales to those needed for provision of food aid.

Four years are the formal start-up; the project in Tanzania is now working in all 11 villages. Village development committees are up and running, forming the communication channel between the NGO and villagers. A wide variety of activities are being undertaken, including horticultural and agricultural support, community capacity building, and dispensary rehabilitation. In each village, the activities are different, reflecting the needs and wishes of its community. The project is moving towards a more self-supporting structure, with just one expatriate remaining and the project co-ordinator role now handed over to a Tanzanian national.

Food aid support sees a problem of lack of food and attempts to provide immediate relief: promotion of food security looks behind the problem and tries to put in place the mechanisms to solve that problem in the longer term. Working towards the food security implies a target of sustainability, which may be a lot to ask for, but is certainly a worthwhile goal.

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