

## FOOD AID PROBLEMATICS

### The Case of Northern and Upper Ghana

On a cloth untrue  
With a twisted cue  
And elliptical billiard balls.

- Gilbert and Sullivan

#### Introduction

The Northern and Upper Regions of Ghana are the poorest regions, the ones facing the most intractable climatic and research problems and the ones with the highest levels of malnutrition. At the peak of the 1981-83 drought they showed the sharpest fall in output (which by 1985 did not appear to have been made good unlike other regions and Ghana as a whole). Even in normal years malnutrition is endemic year round and particularly high in the hungry season before the harvest.

A classic case for food aid? Perhaps albeit except during the drought these regions have not - directly or indirectly - been the major recipients of food aid. An area in which emergency food aid was a success - after all famine was averted in 1983? Yes, but in the absence of war or massive waves of war refugees drought has not led to famine (defined as massive deaths directly related to malnutrition) anywhere in Africa. An example of the wisdom of physically getting relief food to hungry people or areas? Perhaps, but even in 1983 food aid lorries going north regularly passed lorries carrying commercial food flows south. An example of the difficulty of tackling medium term developmental issues with food aid and relating them to immediate survival needs during a crisis? Yes.

## The Food Balance

In a normal or good harvest year the Northern and Upper Regions are major exporters of grain (rice, millet, guinea-corn) root crops (yams), vegetable oilseeds (groundnuts, sheanuts) and livestock to Forest and Southern Ghana as well as to Burkina, Togo, Benin and Nigeria. Except for rice - which is grown in highly mechanised, irrigated large farmer enclaves - and yams - in which case a large farmer sub-sector exists - the sales are largely by small peasant farming households. On the face of it the commercial food flow balance suggests that these are food surplus regions. And so at that level they are.

But the impression these flows might give of well fed farming families is untrue. The malnutrition and infant mortality levels are the highest in Ghana. There is a pronounced hungry season before harvest when many households have nearly run out of food.

For the urban poor (in Tamale and the smaller towns) the paradox is a simple one of entitlements less than needs. Many households do not have the means to buy enough food to meet nutritional needs so these do not result in effective demand. Similarly their incomes do not rise during the hungry season but the cost of food does. For the rural poor the situation appears more complex - households with enough food production to meet dietary needs sell food even though this puts them below the malnutrition line. But this too is an entitlement problem. Ghanaian peasant farmers are not in a "subsistence" sector or economy. They buy goods (cloth, pots and pans, sugar, hoes, matchets) and services (school fees, medical fees, local transport) which are also necessities. Because waged labour opportunities (formal or informal) are limited and non-food crop production even more so there is little option for most but to sell food crops.

This pattern has four implications:

- a. in normal years physical food availability in the geographic area is not the bottom line problem;
- b. shipping food in is likely to alter dietary patterns (millet, guinea corn and yams are unusual food aid components);

- c. if the food aid is sold it will not deal with the malnutrition problem - especially during the hungry season - if nothing is done to augment poor household incomes and thus entitlements/effective demand;
- d. imported food aid given to poor households would improve the dietary position but would - ironically - lead to more cross shipments of food into and out of the regions.

In severe drought years the situation is rather different. There is an absolute shortage, Ghana's early 1980s figures - even if of doubtful accuracy - of under 70% of necessary calories being available on average even nationally do tell something about the food situation, especially in these three regions where availability was substantially less than the national average. But the problem is still basically an entitlement one and substantial cross flows of imported food aid up and commercial domestic food flows down still continue. The pattern is one of empty backhauls and full lorries passing each other going in opposite directions. Since the purpose of food aid is presumably not to maximise road haulage business (and petroleum product use), this cross haul situation cannot be viewed as even second best. That conclusion is reinforced by the fact that the three main external food aid commodities - rice, wheat, maize - do not figure prominently in lower income diets in these three regions. (They do in Forest and Coastal Ghana, especially among formal sector wage employees.)

#### Emergency Needs

In a bad drought year physical food aid flows to the regions are needed. But these will not help poor households unless they are given access to additional income earning possibilities and/or food aid is delivered free or (particularly in urban areas) at subsidised prices. Those are the only two ways of tackling the entitlements gap.

At these periods food aid injections will indeed cause lower prices - and so they should. Drought period peak prices (even assuming the share of farmers as a whole in the 'above normal' element is substantial which is not always the case) will not benefit the hardest hit farming households who have little or no food beyond survival levels and therefore sell very little. Further,

they clearly injure the non-farming poor (perhaps a quarter of the total in these regions) because higher food prices simply erode their entitlements. Nor are skyhigh prices long after the crop is planted (or, a fortiori, harvested) efficient incentives.

But even in sub-normal (and, probably, bad drought) years a substantial proportion of the food aid needs could be met by local purchases (local to the regions that is). This would both limit forced alterations in diet and reduce transport costs substantially. It would, however, also reduce the flow of Northern and Upper Region food to the Coastal and Forest zones. Assuming that food is replaced by food aid that too reduces costs and the strain on a weak road system, an overstretched lorry fleet and the fuel burdened balance of payments.

The optimal use of food aid in such a year would appear to be:

- a. limited shipments of imported white maize and sugar to the Northern and Upper Regions;
- b. substantial purchases of millet, guinea corn, yams, groundnuts and - perhaps - some rice in the regions for free (or food for work) distribution in the regions;
- c. food aid for free distribution in the form of imported white maize and sugar in the rest of the country combined with locally purchased red palm oil;
- d. with food aid wheat and rice sold in the Forest and Coastal zones (especially in the towns) to finance the local purchases.

This pattern would reduce transport costs and limit warping of food patterns. In a drought year the main stress will probably need to be on free distribution although work for food programmes (see below) once established could be expanded in drought years.

The pattern sketched here is likely to apply generally in 2 or 3 years in 10, but on the past drought cycle record these may well be consecutive not scattered years. In other years pockets of crop failure frequently do exist

but in these cases swap or internal monetisation selling wheat/rice and purchasing the actual distributed food in nearby districts with normal harvests should be practicable.

### Entitlement Raising

In a normal year food aid is still needed in the sense that poor households in these regions need more food. However, as noted this is an entitlement problem and may very well co-exist with national physical surpluses (in effective demand terms) as in white maize in 1988. Since Ghana has a permanent deficit in wheat and a substantial one not likely to disappear soon in rice, internal monetisation to allow local purchase of distributed, food for work and work for food programmes would normally be practicable.

Entitlement raising can use several instruments:

- a. selective, e.g. school and clinic feeding programmes;
- b. increasing work opportunities in economically valuable public works projects by financing the labour cost with food;
- c. supplementing wages with food rations;
- d. empowering poor peasant households to produce more;
- e. strengthening directly productive and social sectors to enable them to pay a living wage;
- f. creating fair price shops in areas (e.g. mining and logging towns and perhaps one or two Northern and Upper Region trading towns) characterised by tight oligopsony at wholesale level evidenced by disproportionately high food prices rising whenever local employer wages do whatever the general food market balance;
- g. food subsidies or free distribution whether general or targetted.

The first approach is used with real but limited positive effects. The second is now to be included in PAMSCD (Programme to Mitigate the Social Costs of Adjustment) albeit there appears to be a relatively low proportion of this programme in the three regions considered here. In general this is a way likely to be best programmed by selling wheat and rice on the Coast, transporting money and either buying local staple foods for distribution to employees or paying them the cash and allowing them to buy their own additional food.

The third approach has been used quite successfully by WFP but in the export and export transport sectors (gold mining, timber, ports, railways, highways). As a supplement to capital rehabilitation to cover paying efficiency wages while productivity recovers it has clear merits albeit if large (100% of cash wage for many low wage earners in the Ghana case) it poses inevitable intra enterprise distortions and major phase-out problems. It is in a sense one form of "e" - sectoral/enterprise strengthening albeit that could be done without food aid or using monetised food aid's counterpart for capital or selected operating costs.

Northern and Upper Ghana agricultural productivity is to a large extent intractable. Some micro or local breakthroughs have been made - e.g. Global 2000 in the Upper West - but in general actual food productivity raising (per hectare or per hour) and new seed/technique research has not fared well. (Given the better apparent results in Botswana, Zimbabwe and some other Southern African cases more exchange of information with SACCAR, the South African Development Coordination Conference's agricultural clearing house might prove useful.) However, there are some options known to be practicable:

- a. better health service access and preventative medicine to reduce time lost to enduring and caring for illness;
- b. greater access to nearby pure water on a continuing basis (i.e. including maintenance) both to save time now spent carrying water and to reduce incidence of water born diseases;
- c. food processing and preparation innovations which save time or reduce losses;

- d. better supply of basic hand tools (machets, hoes, shovels, pickaxes);
- e. selective extension of animal drawn implement use;
- f. rehabilitation and development (where feasible) of pond and seasonal stream flow based irrigation (and perhaps animal powered archimedean screw type irrigation from larger rivers and Lake Volta - especially to create an economically viable, labour intensive, small scale rice industry).

The labour saving point is relevant because at peak seasons labour is a constraint. Thus the quite high day wages for agricultural workers for from 30 to 90 days (in these regions) and their relative scarcity. 30 to 90 days work will not draw back townspeople nor - at peak agricultural work time - can a poor/peasant household utilise it without risking its own crops (except in the more densely populated, land scarce districts in the Upper East region).

Food aid can be used to support these programmes. But it can be so used only if:

- a. it is used whether directly (rations) or indirectly (proceeds of sales) to meet labour costs; and/or
- b. is used after monetisation to meet local costs more generally; and
- c. is complemented by foreign exchange or relevant commodity imports (e.g. steel to make implements, drugs for clinics, paper for books and pads for schools) whose sale could also generate counterpart funds toward local costs.

Fair price shops are not extant in Ghana. They may be introduced by one or more large employers. In the Northern and Upper Regions they would probably need to be run by cooperatives (perhaps operated by poor women both to hold prices down and to earn supplemental incomes). However, it is not clear that in these regions oligopsony of the type noted is widespread. Further there are problems of getting assured stable supplies to sell (unless food aid internal swap purchases can be used to buy at harvest and wholesale to the

shops) and a very evident lack of any present organisational base on which to build.

Apart from famine averting relief, general free food distribution is limited in Ghana. Food stamps would on the face of it appear likely to be impracticable whether as a subsidy or a free ration mechanism.

### Seasonality

None of the food aid programming appears to face the hungry season challenge head on. There is a need to inject entitlements disproportionately during the pre-harvest season when they are otherwise lowest for poor families.

To a limited extent this is done in some clinic and other ngo food distribution/diet supplementation programmes. But where it is most needed is in supplementary employment. At least much of the hungry season has good (i.e. dry) weather for public works and limited crop tending demands. This counter seasonality could - and should - be built into labour intensive public works programmes.

A rather different seasonality problem exists in relation to commercialised food aid arrival and sale patterns. This relates primarily to rice (a Northern and Upper East regional crop albeit largely an enclave one) since no wheat and little sugar are produced and maize imports are in response to severely below normal crops. About half of Ghana's rice consumption is produced locally. Given limited storage, imports of food aid rice during and just after harvest result in greater seasonal price swings for rice and lower prices for the domestic crop. These problems could be reduced by scheduling 0 rice aid arrivals for the harvest quarter, one-eighth of the year's imports in the next, one-quarter in the third and three-eighths in the pre-harvest quarter. This would reduce counterpart fund proceeds but directly to the advantage of growers and - during the pre-harvest quarter - consumers.



### From Emergency To Development

The seasonality and entitlement potentials of food aid in Northern and Upper Ghana as sketched above are largely developmental. The emergency aspect is just that - emergency coping, starvation averting.

This leaves an undistributed middle-rehabilitation. It has been noted above that recovery in Northern and Upper Ghana after 1983 appears to have lagged that in Ghana as a whole. Weather does not appear to be the cause.

One factor is fairly clearly that many poor households had had their productive capacity gravely eroded during the three year drought. For example:

- a. seed stocks had been run down and with cash reserves gone buying was not a practicable alternative;
- b. hand tools had suffered a similar fate;
- c. as had livestock herds (cattle, goats, poultry);
- d. in addition there had been deterioration of certain productive infrastructure, e.g. natural and artificial ponds used to water livestock in the dry months and for limited irrigation during the rains. Albeit this began well before 1980 it was by 1984 - and is as of 1989 - a major rehabilitation problem.

To these can be added "deferred maintenance" on houses (which becomes urgent to make good after 2 to 4 years) and the need to rebuild exhausted household inter year grain reserves.

These are rehabilitation of household livelihood and welfare capacity needs not developmental programmes in the normal sense. But nor are they emergency needs as normally defined. Emergency programmes do not in many cases include them at all and when they do these are usually gross underfunded heads compared to emergency food for distribution.

Logically during every emergency programme (not only in Northern and Upper Ghana) the parameters of need for rehabilitation support should be outlined, means to meeting them identified and resources mobilised. Whether food aid - as opposed to its counterpart funds - could make a large contribution is unclear and probably varies from case to case. In these regions 1984-87 supplementary employment clearly would have been directly relevant as would tool provision financed in part by the sale of wheat (and provision of steel commodity aid). The clear lesson is that the dichotomy now existing in virtually all aid agencies (including but not limited to food aid) between emergency and development is counterproductive and tends to allow rehabilitation to fall between two stools with anything but a soft landing for the people affected.

#### Women, Food and Nutrition

Northern and Upper Ghana are characterised by gender divisions of labour (and of workloads) and of budgetary responsibilities. Programmes overlooking those realities are likely to have unexpected (and usually unfortunately so) results or non-results.

Agricultural tasks are largely gender divided (admittedly rarely 100% one gender) as well as product divided. Cattle herding tends to be male as do large scale agriculture and non-food crops; production of food crops for the household is predominantly female after land clearing.

Similarly, wooding, watering, food processing and tending the sick are predominantly (in some areas virtually exclusively) female. Therefore time saved by provision of better services or techniques in respect of these tasks will reduce women's workloads (which tend to be much greater than men's) and free time for directly productive activity at the key agricultural seasons when the labour constraint is binding.

To recognise the existence of a gender division of labour (not as it happens a traditional one in some respects) is important but needs to be separated from necessarily endorsing it. For example, day labour is largely male. It would, however, be desirable to take positive steps to ensure that a significant proportion of supplementary, and especially seasonal, employment

was female. Animal use is basically male but female headed households should be included in programmes to extend use of animal power. But equally because water gathering is a female task, women should be taught improved source maintenance and management skills and be involved in project planning and design.

The employment point relates to budget structures. Northern and Upper Ghanaian households rarely have single pooled budgets. Women usually keep earnings from food processing and selling, small scale food selling, and related 'female activities' and when they do have wage incomes normally keep these as well. From these and their own food production plus - sometimes - a contribution from the adult male household member, it is the woman's responsibility to feed the household. Food rations given to a man in kind are usually passed on to his wife which explains their remarkably positive household amity impact in the WFP food ration programme..

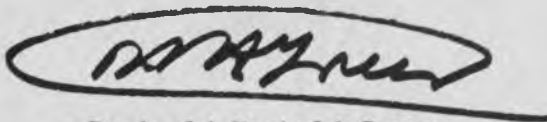
Thus what income streams are augmented, who earns them and whether food for work or work for (cash to buy) food is practised can affect how much the nutritional status of poor households is improved by food aid (and policy interventions more generally).

#### Envoi

This review of problematics and as yet unrealised potentials is not a condemnation of food aid in general or to Northern and Upper Ghana in particular. In the latter case it did avert starvation in 1983/84, has assisted some aspects of recovery and is being used somewhat more creatively in PAMSCAD.

Rather it suggests that more programming attention is needed to local procurement (vs 'Food Fetishist' demands all imported food aid literally be handed to the ultimate poor beneficiaries), to selective monetisation, to creative utilisation in support of developments that will assist poor households and empower them to earn/produce more and to relating emergency and developmental food aid through a household (or broader in the case of debilitated regions) rehabilitation phase. The challenge is not that food aid is in any general sense failing, but that the efficiency of its use for

development and especially development both by and serving poor households can and should be increased substantially and speedily.

A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed within a hand-drawn oval. The signature is cursive and appears to read 'R. Herbold Green'.

- Reginald Herbold Green  
Falmer  
January 1989