Sale of Food Aid as Sign of Distress not Excess

Summary of Published Paper

In February 1996, WFP reduced rations for refugees in Uvira, Zaire by 20% when visiting donors noted that food aid, primarily maize and oil, was being sold in local markets and even exported. The donors' interpretation was that the refugees were getting too much food aid. UNHCR undertook a study to explore the causes of the food aid sale.

The refugees in the eleven Uvira camps were Burundian and Rwandan. Before the ration reduction, refugees received maize, beans, oil, CSB and salt amounting to 1936 kcals per capita. After the ration reduction, refugees received between 1491 and 1594 kcals. The maize was usually yellow maize and the oil was unfortified vegetable oil.

The UNHCR study began with observation and open-ended interviews with key informants drawn from refugees, camp workers and Zairian farmers. Subsequently, 1005 households were randomly selected in order to study buying, selling and eating patterns. The households were classified into four income groups according to income source.

Findings

Maize, and less frequently, other commodities, were sold to obtain cash for other items - most commonly salt and soap - neither of which had been consistently distributed. Maize was the first choice for sale. The dried corn was unfamiliar and not liked. Cooked as whole grain, the maize required much fuel. Women complained that the maize caused diarrhoea and that their children could not or would not eat it. Parents sold it to buy fruit, sugar and cassava flour for small children. When possible, parents gave CSB to young children, but it had only been distributed twice during a 10-month period. Refugees bartered vegetable oil for an equal quantity of locally produced palm oil. Refugees preferred the taste of the latter.

Forty two percent of household reported some foodaid sales and 80% of these had most recently sold maize. Fifty four percent had sold oil at least once. Reasons for sales were to purchase another food, to break dietary monotony or to balance their diet (49%). Twenty five percent of sales were to buy salt and 12% because of intolerance to a commodity (usually oil). Households with the lowest income were twice as likely to have sold or exchanged food aid proceeds than were other groups.

Key informants reported that the food distributed for 15 day periods lasted only 2-10 days depending on the commodity. In the week preceding the survey 45% of households had gone without eating for at least a day.

Discussion

In Uvira, refugees were selling food aid commodities to satisfy basic dietary and non-food needs, most of which would have been satisfied if relief targets for distribution had been met. A quarter of food aid sales reported would have been avoided with delivery of promised salt. The energy cost of maize sold to buy salt for one day for a family of five was 350 kcals per person (25% of what was actually delivered). Soap lasted 2 days on average and half a bar of soap was equivalent to the cost of 1.5 kgs of maize. When soap was not delivered scabies became rampant. In the Uvira camps there were no complementary foods like meat, fish, vegetables or fruit distributed. Although there was some cultivation it was inadequate in terms of providing complementary foods, at least during the dry season. So the primary means of getting additional food was via sale of general ration commodities.
The glut of maize on the market was clearly due to its low acceptability. It was sold even though it brought the lowest return per calorie. Sale of smaller quantities of beans or oil to buy salt would have resulted in loss of fewer calories. The authors of the study assert that maize was distributed to unload donor surpluses, and that WFP even bought maize in Africa for distribution to these refugees because no other cereal was available at a comparable price per unit energy. Maize would have been more acceptable if milled - as was WFP policy. However, WFP/HCR were unsuccessful in establishing milling facilities in Uvira. It is further asserted that instead of reacting negatively to refugees trading as a coping strategy refugee organisations should have facilitated the market. The provision of salt and the substitution of oil or CSB or rice in the ration for maize would have permitted refugees to buy greater amounts of other foods.

The study concludes that reasons behind food aid sales must be explored before rations are reduced. In Uvira, the reduction in the rations merely exacerbated problems originating from inefficient international relief efforts. Choice of food commodities, without due consideration for cultural preference, micronutrient needs and food preparation requirements, can lead to a marked reduction in energy intake. It reinforces the wisdom of existing policies that mandate the delivery of culturally acceptable foods, including non-caloric items like salt, the provision of cereals in milled form and access by refugees to complementary foods. The fact that more than three quarters of households did not have sufficient diets and that rations were reduced because food sales had been misinterpreted by donors and responded to inappropriately by WFP is disheartening.


Taken from Field Exchange 4

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