

PART 1: FACT SHEET

The fact sheet is the first of four parts contained in this module. It provides an overview of key information relating to general food distribution. Detailed technical information is covered in Part 2. Words in italics are defined in the glossary.

Food rations and objectives of general food distribution

General food distribution (GFD) is the term used for food rations that are given out to selected households affected by an emergency. The food ration consists of a number of items (the minimum three are cereal, pulses and oil, but items such as salt, sugar, fresh vegetables, canned meat or fish can be added). The general ration is normally delivered as a package of dry items.

GFD is used to respond to an assessed food need based on livelihood, economic or nutritional indicators or to vulnerable demographic groups identified as in need of food. The objectives of a general food distribution arise from the definition of need and could vary from saving lives and protecting the nutritional status of a population to protecting and rehabilitating livelihoods.

Assessing Food Needs

An assessment to determine the priority needs of those affected should be one of the first stages in planning the relief response. There are three broad approaches used for assessing the food needs of a population. These involve assessment of livelihood or economic outcomes, nutritional outcomes and vulnerable groups. Assessments of the need for food assistance generally determine;

- Whether food assistance is needed,
- How much is needed and what types of food,
- Who needs food assistance and for how long,
- Locally available resources.

This provides the information and understanding needed to inform key decisions in the whole process of general food distribution including setting objectives, planning the ration, targeting, distributing and monitoring.

Ration planning for GFD

There are two stages for calculating food aid requirements. The *energy* requirement of different individuals varies depending on physical activity, age, sex, body size and climate. Fat and protein should provide at least 17 per cent and 10 to 12 per cent respectively of the energy in a well-balanced diet. All foods are made up of a combination of *macronutrients* (protein, fat, carbohydrate) and *micronutrients* (vitamins and minerals). Together with water, these nutrients are essential for life. The first stage of ration planning is to establish the energy requirements and the second stage is to select the quantity and type of food commodities.

Stage 1: Calculate energy needs

The planning figure of 2100 kcals (or 2400 kcals for the International Committee of the Red Cross) is multiplied by the population size to establish the overall energy requirements for a population. The planning figure of 2100 kcals may be adjusted for the following reasons:

- **Age and structure of the population.** Women and children require less energy than men.
- **Nutrition and health status of the population.** Malnourished children require extra food for catch-up growth.
- **Physical activity levels.**
- **Environmental temperature.** For every 5°C drop below 20°C, an additional 100 kcal/day/person should be provided.
- **Access to alternative food sources.**
- **Provision of milled or unmilled cereal.** The volume of milled cereal is 20 per cent less than whole cereal.

Stage 2: Design of the Food Basket

The following should be considered when selecting the commodities for the food ration.

- **Nutritional and dietary considerations.** Foods supplied in the ration must be nutritionally complementary to the foods people obtain for themselves.

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- **Environmental Conditions:** Populations in need of food support may be living in conditions that influence the selection of commodities.
- **Risk of Micronutrient Deficiency Diseases (MDDs)**
- **Acceptability and familiarity of the food items.**
- **Storage, quality control and specifications.** All foods distributed must be fit for human consumption and meet certain quality specifications.
- **Food processing and preparation.** Food commodities should be easy and quick to prepare and cook.

Food basket commodities

GFD rations are usually composed of a minimum of cereals, pulses and oil with additional items added as appropriate and feasible. Additional commodities can include canned meat, cheese, dried fish, fortified blended foods including CSB+/++, sugar, salt, High Energy Biscuits, or Meals Ready-to-Eat.

Targeting and eligibility criteria

Targeting is based on a broad set of indicators, reflecting who has been affected by a shock and to what degree. Targeting criteria shape the design and objective of the GFD, aims to ensure that food aid is received on the basis of need and endeavours to prevent 'harm' by limiting any negative impact of food aid. Above all else, targeting is implemented to maximize the efficient and effective use of resources. Ideally, the cost (in terms of time, human resources, food and funds) of targeting should be less than the cost of distributing food to the entire population. Targeting generally falls into two broad categories: individuals or households (or groups of households).

For targeting to be justified, there should be significant and identifiable differences between the target and non-targeted population. Eligibility criteria must specify the characteristics of these individuals or households to be targeted and they should be practical and transparent.

All food aid is geographically targeted in the sense of distributing food to the population of one geographical area and excluding another. Targeting may take place between countries, between regions in a country or between sub-region, food economy or livelihood zones, districts or villages. Targeting within geographic areas is appropriate when:

1. There are identifiable differences between the intended target and non-target population
2. The targeted population is a minority of the population with identified differences in need
3. It is operationally feasible to implement a targeted distribution
4. The community co-operates with the targeting strategy

The two main approaches for targeting are through administrative targeting or community based targeting. Administrative targeting involves government officials and humanitarian agencies using registration systems. Community based targeting relies on a community elected committee who has the responsibility for defining eligibility criteria, identifying recipients and distributing the food aid.

Distribution Modalities

There are two primary systems for distributing food aid to the general population: take home rations and large scale cooked food distribution. Take home rations consists of large distribution of commodities from centralized distribution points for preparation at the household level. Cooked food distribution is only an option in quite specific circumstances such as when people lack the necessary space or materials or where insecurity would put recipients of take-home rations at risk.

In general, food based responses still dominate in emergency settings. Increasingly, food assistance instruments might include direct food based transfers (such as food-for-work, etc.), food subsidies, cash transfers and vouchers and agricultural and livestock support. Food-for-work and voucher programs are of most relevance in an emergency setting where food support is considered a requirement.

A number of factors help to ensure a successful GFD system:

- Context awareness
- Management and coordination.
- Training and support for the implementation process.
- Decentralised GFD system.
- Timing of the GFD
- Involvement of Women
- Cost to the recipients

Monitoring and evaluation of GFD programmes

A good monitoring system should assess whether the decision to target food within a certain geographical area is appropriate, the most vulnerable receive the food aid, the food aid is of acceptable quality, the objectives of the GFD are achievable and realistic and whether adverse effects of food aid are avoided. Agreement on who has to collect what information, the appropriate format to use and how to analyse the data and report on the information should be reached at the outset. Key components of a monitoring system for a GFD programme include impact monitoring, anthropometric monitoring, food ration monitoring, distribution and storage reporting, post-distribution monitoring including market surveys and household visits as well as monitoring non-recipients.

Key messages

1. Assessment should be carried out to determine if food support is a priority need in the context in question and to define who, for how long, how much and with what types of food.
2. The objectives of a GFD are developed from the needs assessment and could vary from saving lives and protecting the nutritional status of a population to protecting and rehabilitating livelihoods.
3. The nutrition and energy needs of a population are affected by a number of factors (climate, activity, health and nutrition status, age and sex), which must all be considered when planning food aid requirements. It is important to consider the risk of MDDs among populations dependent on food aid and ensure the planned ration minimizes the risk of MDD.
4. The GFD should meet the nutrition and energy needs of the recipient population. The food provided should be appropriate and, ideally, be familiar to the population. There are two stages to planning a ration: establishing the energy requirements of the population, and selecting the type and quantity of food.
5. Eligibility criteria must specify the characteristics of individuals or households which are thought to require a certain quantity and quality of food.
6. Targeting uses eligibility criteria and aims to maximize the efficient and effective use of resources.
7. All food aid is geographically targeted in the sense of distributing food to the population of one geographical area and excluding another. Targeting may take place between countries, between regions in a country or between sub-region, food economy or livelihood zones, districts or villages.
8. There are two primary systems for distributing food aid to the general population: take home rations and large scale cooked food distribution. Other forms of general food distribution, such as Food-for-Work and voucher programs are gaining in popularity.
9. Accountability, transparency and coordination are key elements for implementing a successful GFD.
10. Monitoring all aspects of the GFD should ensure that food effectively reaches intended beneficiaries in the agreed quantities and measure its impact on food security and nutrition.
11. A GFD can be phased out when its objectives have been achieved, and the implementation criteria no longer apply.

GFD Termination

The two criteria for the termination of a GFD are set during its planning phase: its objectives must have been achieved, and the implementation criteria must no longer apply (as demonstrated in monitoring and evaluation findings). In some circumstances however, GFD must be terminated earlier

because unexpected negative effects have occurred, because security conditions no longer permit its continuation, or because monitoring and evaluation has revealed new parameters that require a thorough review of the rationale underlying the current GFD.

