

Teaching programme staff to identify likely food shortages and to tackle their consequences

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Famines have many causes: only one of these is absolute shortage of food. Famines may also result from political or physical blockages in the food distribution system (food is available but not getting to the people). There is usually some food in a famine-affected area but most people will be unable to purchase it; either their income has fallen or prices have risen, or both. Indeed, there may be more food available in famine years than in non-famine years (Currey, 1981). Famine is one of the crises that disadvantaged communities may face, a crisis in which the poorest 'go to the wall': they may be forced to leave their homes and travel in search of food, and some, weakened by starvation, will die of infectious diseases. Health and development programme staff need to identify households and individuals at risk before such a crisis develops and to seek necessary assistance.

In the present paper I shall discuss the situations in which food crises may develop and consider ways in which concerned programme staff can be taught to predict, detect, assess and alleviate food crises in developing countries. I shall consider the training needs of field staff working in areas where food crises are likely to occur, and relief personnel who are posted into such areas once a crisis is established.

The insidious development of food crises

I shall start by reviewing the ways in which food crises develop, drawing on studies from Bangladesh (Currey, 1984).

Many rural societies are prone to food crises. They will usually be societies where poor harvests occur frequently (and they will have been designated flood- or drought-prone areas). The social groups most at risk will include the poorest subsistence farmers (marginal farmers) and landless labourers. Even under normal circumstances these farmers do not produce enough food to provide for their families through to the next harvest. The labourers depend for their livelihoods on there being crops to tend and harvest, and opportunities for work are reduced if the harvests are poor. Their households will experience increased stresses after poor harvests. They have to sell assets (such as animals or land) in order to purchase food. They will go into debt (at exorbitant rates of interest) in order to obtain loans for food. They may move, temporarily, in search of employment to earn cash and buy food. At the same time, food prices will rise. There will be an increased incidence of malnutrition among both adults and children. Children may suffer and

die after contracting illnesses that would normally leave them unscathed. Perhaps their parents are busy trying to earn money and cannot give them the care they need. Perhaps the absolute lack of food in their homes, particularly high-energy foods, leads to reduced intake, weight loss and impaired body functions. The majority of children will survive the difficult months and households will go into the new year praying that their luck will be better next time. The farmers want the rains to come on time, the pests to leave their crops alone and the stocks of fertilizers and seed-grain to be available when they need them. The labourers want well-paid work for as long as possible, so they share the farmers' hopes; they also want the labour pool to stay small and food prices to keep low, and usually they have no control over either.

The position is much worse if there is a succession of poor harvests, a dramatic rain failure, a transport strike, or if prices suddenly rise because of external economic factors or if the food systems are disrupted by hostilities and war. The households that normally depend on cash income to tide them through the 'lean' months will face severe cash shortages as opportunities for agricultural employment will fall. At the same time, food prices will increase even before demand starts to rise, so the purchasing power of what cash is available will fall rapidly. If households perceive that affordable food is available elsewhere they will migrate in search of it. If not they will stay put, resorting to desperate means to raise cash and facing increased risks of death, usually from the combined effects of starvation and disease.

The initiation of relief

Government and non-government organization (NGO) workers in societies that are about to experience food crises will be able to detect signs that things are going wrong well before the food system breaks down and the crisis is manifest. If relief mechanisms exist, and can be mobilized effectively, efficiently and rapidly, much suffering can be prevented. Indeed, potential crises are frequently being alleviated in this manner without there being cause for widespread international concern. Sometimes, though, relief mechanisms do not exist, or cannot be mobilized on time, and widespread, often well-publicized suffering, ensues. Such 'public' famines represent both a failure of a society's food system and of its normal coping mechanisms. Publicity is inevitable once people start to move to a place where food and hope are available. Cine and television film or newspaper articles featuring collections of miserable parents and their malnourished children provoke public and institutional outrage, and may trigger a response that is motivated by compassion, anger and guilt; agencies that were unable to respond to earlier indications of crisis are pressured to institute high-profile relief efforts that try to break into a damaged food system in order to prevent further suffering and death. A food crisis is an indication that the food systems in a society have collapsed; the inception of an international relief effort usually implies that the normal rules of development assistance will be broken. Relief agencies are provoked into providing

and executing direct assistance: they need to intervene rapidly and there is rarely sufficient time for their efforts to be co-ordinated.

Multiple causes, complex problems and tricky solutions

Most of us are aware that food crises invariably have complex origins, their alleviation is bound to be difficult, and relief efforts designed to get food to those in need are often inefficiently co-ordinated. Given these realities, we might be forgiven for asking whether improved teaching of programme staff can lead to the more efficient identification of potential crises and their alleviation in an effective manner.

Sensitizing field personnel

Programme staff working in areas where food crises are likely need to know the ways in which food shortages are likely to develop and the signs that households, or groups of households, are starting to experience difficulty. In practice the earliest signs are (1) a rise in the prices of staple food crops, (2) an increased demand for employment opportunities and (3) requests for loans to purchase food. These signs appear long before the more dramatic evidence that a crisis has arrived, such as increased incidence of malnutrition, migration of families in search of employment or the increased severity of illness that characterizes malnourished populations.

Assessing the severity of a food crisis

Once senior programme staff have been alerted to the possibility that a crisis is developing, they need to know techniques for making rapid assessments of the severity of the crisis. This means that they need to monitor what is happening over time, looking for trends, and to have access to measurements that indicate what is happening. The methods that can be used have been described by Cutler (1987): I shall illustrate their application in the context of a drought that affected inland districts in the State of Orissa, India, in 1979.

The district collectors requested their sub-divisional officers to assess the extent of problems faced by households in their districts at regular intervals so that frequent reports on the severity of the food crisis could be sent to the State government. Each sub-division consisted of a number of community development blocks with populations of between 50 000 and 100 000.

Block development officers were requested to supply information about the extent of crop losses in their blocks, and to report any indications that the people were experiencing hardship. They monitored crop prices (which showed considerable variation even inside the blocks), asked health workers to report the incidence of malnutrition, checked up reports of starvation deaths and met with village representatives to obtain first-hand accounts of their problems. In some situations the sub-divisional officers authorized 'test' programmes to assess the severity of the situation. There were two different kinds: (1) A fixed quantity of food-grain was made available in local markets; its existence was publicized.

Demand for food-grain was assessed noting the number of persons who wanted to purchase this grain. (2) Small construction projects (such as road or dam building) were established in areas under study; payment was given as food for work. Demand for employment was assessed by noting the number of persons who came in search of work.

Blocks in which there was clear evidence of food crisis were declared as drought-affected: the officers concerned then set about calculating the approximate numbers of people who were facing problems. The first stage was the identification of the particular households that were most likely to be at risk, using classifications based on the economic status of households (land-area owned, adjusted for the quality of the land) or the occupation of householders. If the area was 'severely affected', households of landless labourers, marginal farmers and small farmers would be in difficulty; the small farmers would be excluded in the mildly affected areas. Officers also identified households with extremely limited resources which would need special relief: those headed by a single parent, or where the head of the household was infirm (classifying them as destitute).

The number of people in the affected categories was then estimated on the basis of census records; the number of vulnerable people, pregnant women, lactating mothers, and children, was also calculated as they were to be offered additional food supplements.

Initiating a response

The information collected in the blocks was collated by the sub-divisional officers and collectors, to be passed on to the State government. The government, in turn, responded by (a) setting up schemes for the distribution of food reserves and marketing the food through controlled-price food shops; (b) initiating food-for-work programmes; (c) increasing the food available for beneficiaries of supplementary feeding programmes; (d) increasing the numbers of staff in primary health centres and sub-centres, and issuing them with extra medicines; (e) distributing seed-grain so that farmers would be able to plant crops on time and, hopefully, have better yields at the next harvest.

The government found that controls were needed to ensure that these interventions actually benefited those most in need. They were usually the least powerful members of village societies, and government officers were hard-pressed to ensure that irregularities were kept to a minimum. Food was a very scarce resource and anyone who obtained more than the permitted ration from the fair-price shop, or any other source, and marketed it privately was able to make substantial profits. Public groups in India are now well aware of these kinds of difficulties and their vigilance brought problems to the notice of officials and encouraged them to try to overcome difficulties in implementing interventions. NGOs working in the drought-affected areas were able to help. Field-based programme staff were well placed to help ensure that those who needed assistance received it, though they often needed explicit back-up from their superiors when

experiencing intense local pressure to pass the food out through 'non-official' channels.

The need for training

Training is needed to strengthen the capacity of field staff and programme managers to function in the manner that I have described. Field-based staff need to learn quantitative skills to be able to describe what they are seeing; programme managers often need help to enable them to cope with the complexity of food crisis situations.

Helping field staff to identify and describe crises. People who are suffering as a result of food crises are quick to inform field-based programme staff. The staff concerned usually consider that they do not have the power to bring help. Anecdotal information is unlikely to bring about a response unless it is backed by sensational press reporting or intense political lobbying, or both (Ahmed, 1985a, b).

However, field-based staff who understand some of the principles of information collection can generate information that is of immense use to their superiors. They need to know what to measure in order to provide a sensitive indication of an impending crisis. They need to obtain such information at regular intervals to illustrate whether matters are getting better, staying stable or deteriorating. They need to understand the principles of functional classification so that they can identify the social groups who are most at risk. If the situation is serious they need to know how to assess nutritional status and express their results as rates rather than absolute numbers. If they can produce this kind of information, field staff are better able to enter into dialogue with their superiors.

In my experience, field staff will only master such quantitative skills if they are taught them in the context of their own work, and we favour the provision of regular in-service training courses that enable field workers to appreciate the value of epidemiological and social science data-collection techniques. Standard textbooks are unhelpful; exercises based on local problems and needs are required. Such courses need a great deal of preparation and follow-up. Trainees need to have the opportunity to discuss the application of what they have learnt at regular intervals after they have first learnt it.

Helping programme managers to consider and, perhaps, implement remedies. Most programme managers envisage food crises as being the result of single causes which can easily be overcome by direct and decisive action. Health professionals have received many years' training to prepare them to think in this way. In practice, though, food crises are brought about when the food system breaks down; they have many causes and alleviating any one of them may only have a limited effect. Relief workers are invariably energetic and selfless people motivated by a profound desire to help those in need. If they are not able to comprehend, and feel comfortable with, the complexity of the systems with which they are working, their efforts may misfire badly. Relief administrators 'must understand the complexity of community dynamics in order to enhance those on-going changes in

the community which ensure sustainable food security for marginal members' (Currey, 1984).

Those responsible for planning and implementing relief measures need a range of skills. Clearly they must be able to plan and budget programmes in a systematic fashion, obtaining relevant information about the extent of the problems to be tackled and settling up supply, distribution and welfare systems to meet these demands.

They need access to up-to-date knowledge about the nutritional, medical, water and sanitation needs of those experiencing food crises. Recent publications from both relief agencies (Shears, 1983) and research groups (Simmonds *et al.* 1983) provide this information and guidelines for action in a readily accessible form. The increasing popularity of short training courses in the technical aspects of disaster relief will ensure that the information becomes widely disseminated. However, if programme managers and those who direct them wish to initiate the gradual repair of damaged food systems, they need other knowledge, skills and characteristics as well. It's not enough for managers to know the latest methods for assessing nutritional status, to be skilled at management techniques like critical path analysis, or to possess decisive personalities with strong leadership qualities. They need to know about the economic and political structures that determine the way food systems function, especially where the executive branch of government is overstretched (Chambers, 1983). They need to be skilled at assessing the behaviour of food systems, to identify factors that limit their performance and to analyse possible options for their repair. They need to be patient; to acknowledge that in the drama and urgency of famine relief whatever is left of the indigenous food system may be damaged even further. They need to accept the inevitability of uncertainty, confusion and conflict; to be able to change plans and make adjustments without losing face, and to cope with the certainty that many of their endeavours will be unsuccessful. They need to recognize that they serve many clients at times of crisis; the endangered community, their leaders, national governments, international agencies and, sometimes, superpowers. It's not always possible to satisfy all, yet those who survive 'in the business' have remarkable track records.

Those of us concerned with the training of senior programme staff do not find it easy to help trainees to learn these vital skills. Yet we all know of field workers, nationals and expatriates, who have rare and outstanding qualities, who are effective in much of what they do and who manage, despite all odds, to nibble away at the difficult task of rebuilding damaged systems in societies that face externally-imposed food crises. Rarely do they stand out as decisive leaders, brilliant epidemiologists or skilled managers.

Institutions that teach the professionals working in senior positions in development and relief programmes face difficult challenges. They are looking for ways to build on the quality of their technical training in community health and nutrition. They have been offering training in programme management for some years. I sense that some institutions are beginning to search for ways to help

programme staff master the interpersonal, tactical and self-righting skills that they need. To do this, teachers need to experience what actually happens in different situations, to record the reality with care, and not to feel constrained to highlight success while playing down what hasn't worked. In their analyses teachers need to declare, and be confronted with their own ideological and professional biases. This is a big challenge but it must be met. If we avoid it the cost will be far too high.

None of the views expressed in this paper is original. However, the author emphasizes that they should not be attributed to any agency or institution with which he is connected.

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